

BLOOD TIES:
SOUTHERN VAMPIRES
IN
TRUE BLOOD

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By

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the figure of the vampire has proliferated in American literature and media. According to Stephen King, creatures of horror such as vampires appear cyclically in cultural representations to exorcise social anxieties and to cope with periods of acute crisis. In Nina Auerbach's view, vampires are powerful representations of social critique who adapt themselves to different cultures and historical times. Against this background, I will analyze how the modern American vampire intersects with contemporary American culture in the TV series *True Blood*. Because the setting of this media text is the American South, my approach will be regional. I will highlight the characteristics of this area of the United States by discussing the different cultural values embodied by the Southern vampires.

I will investigate how the representation of these modern vampires is an expression of the American regional past due to its connections with an important historical moment: the American Civil War. This framework will help me explain why regional vampires embody specific cultural values, and I will show how these characters are peculiar because they offer opposite portrayals simultaneously produced within the same culture. In order to highlight the cultural aspects emerging from *True Blood*, I will frame my analysis through the lenses of capitalism and race. These two focal points will allow me to discuss contemporary American culture and its contradictions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Regional Vampires: An Overview

In recent years, vampires have proliferated in the U.S. literary scene as well as in movies, likely reaching their climax of success with media productions such as the TV show *True Blood* (2008-2014). Why has the phenomenon of vampires become so endemic? Stephen King claims that representations of horror are an index for the society which produces them (31). As an expression of popular culture, horror responds to the historical backgrounds in which it is created, “exposing the tensions in the society it addresses” (Magistrale 27). In addition, King states that manifestations of horror intensify in periods of acute social, cultural or economic crisis (419). If we frame this concept within contemporary American society, the widespread appearance of vampires on the printed page and in movies is no surprise. Threats to the U.S. seem to be everywhere: terrorism, 9/11, criminality, massive immigration, the economic crisis and the ultimate failure of the capitalistic model, among the others.

These are just a few of the historical events which America experienced in recent years and which deeply shook its image as international superpower. As Joni Richards-Bodart notices, America lives now in the “culture of fear” (xxii-xxiii); social uncertainties are everywhere and no one is to be trusted because dangers hide behind every corner and, often, in our very homes. Because the sense of anxiety comes from a multiplicity of different sources, American vampires respond to this collective feeling by embodying heterogeneous characteristics that at times seem even to oppose each other. In particular, the Deep South vampires of the show *True Blood*, adapted from Charlaine Harris’ *Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels, step forward to declare their own identity in the attempt to gain a bourgeois mainstream life through capitalist behaviours. At the same time, they show significant connections with oppressed minorities and embody the heritage of African-American slavery in the region. Who are these vampires for the audience? And to which historical and cultural needs do these American vampires respond?

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide the theoretical background used to support my media analysis. After a brief account of the evolution of the vampire from classic portrayals to modern ones, a section about the methodological approach to this work will follow. Due to the relevance of cultural context to this work, a section focusing on the most significant American cultural values will be included, with brief historical references which explain how these values have developed. The chapter will also include two sections about the Marxist interpretation of the vampire-capitalist and the representation of race in movies and TV, which will be both at the core of the analysis of the *True Blood* series.

The second chapter will deal with the *True Blood* series and its connections with the historical heritage of the American Civil War, which is helpful to understand the contemporary

American South. Referring to Sigmund Freud's theories, the chapter will address the link between the *True Blood* vampires and their role as projections of collective Southern anxiety resulting from the trauma of the Civil War. It will also include side references to *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), another famous vampire movie set at the heart of American South which was adapted from Anne Rice's novel. The chapter will describe how these vampires function as a metaphor for the repressed past of the region. It will attempt to list the particular issues behind these characters, expanding the traditional theme of the vampire as symbol for the sexual repression within the mechanism that associates *Eros* (love) and *Thanatos* (death).

The first part of the chapter will address how the defeat of the Civil War was a traumatic event for the American South. It will investigate the vampires' relation with the Marxist interpretation of the vampire and their support of capitalism through bourgeois mainstreaming. It will analyze the portrayal of these undead as negative reminders of the Northerners, who have imposed the capitalist system in the region as a result of the War. The second part of the chapter will describe how the regional psychological rejection of Otherness reaches an interesting expression through the parallel between the vampires, the heritage of slavery and the subversion of tropes of whiteness and blackness in the show. In particular, it will deal with the discrimination of minority groups and African-Americans to discuss issues of race in the American South.

1.2 Fifty Shades of Otherness: Vampirism, Dracula's Legacy and the Evolution of the Modern Vampire

The concept of the vampire as Other was not invented by Anne Rice or Charlaine Harris. Among the variety of meanings attributed to vampires both on the page and on the screen, the concept of Otherness¹ was particularly prominent since their literary birth. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), not the first but probably the first successful novel of the genre, articulated this concept within the cultural anxieties of Victorian society. To highlight this concept, Ken Gelder supports Patrick Brantlinger's view in defining *Dracula* as an example of "Imperial Gothic" (Gelder 11). *Dracula* showed Victorian England how fragile its idea of cultural and national identity could be by invoking "the undesirable diversity of Eastern nations" (11). From the bucolic, wild Transylvania, Count Dracula, descendant of a noble Central-European family and possibly a *Nosferatu*, moves to England, ready to take over the British Empire at its core.

From the Victorian perspective, nothing could be more horrid than being "contaminated" by such diversity because it represented the possibility of being culturally absorbed by other nations, thus losing British national identity:

1. In *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, Homi Bhabha states that the Other is the oppressed subject who comes back to haunt the colonizer externalizing a discourse of power relations and knowledge from which stereotypes of Otherness originate. These stereotypes generate both the "phobia and fetish" (25) which cause the ambivalent senses of familiarity and refusal surrounding the contact with the Other: "It is not possible to see how power functions productively as incitement and interdiction. Nor would it be possible, without the attribution of ambivalence to relations of power/knowledge, to calculate the traumatic impact of the return of the oppressed – those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation" (25).

Diversity means instability: it invites contestation: identities become confused: one can no longer tell 'who was who'. In short, diversity means the *loss* of one's nationality – hardly appropriate for an imperialist ideology which depends upon a stable identification between nation and self. The more diverse a nation, the less claim it has to national identity; and this 'weakening' of identity makes it more vulnerable to absorption by imperialistic nations elsewhere. (Gelder 12)

In other words, the horror of vampirization was clearly identified with the fear of counter-colonization (Arata 623, Gelder 12, Kwan-Wai Yu 145). Turning into a vampire meant not only to dissolve British national identity but also to show the fragility behind the propagandist façade of invincibility built around the Empire. This weakness is clear if we analyze Dracula in order to define British versus non-British identities. Because Dracula's lineage includes "the blood of many brave races" (Stoker 23), Dracula's identity is the result of a long process of hybridization which strengthened his Self through a prolonged multiculturalism. He is also "expert in British costumes and language" (Gelder 12), and this makes him even more dangerous due to its ability to move unseen in England and across cultural borders. Instead, British identity proved to be lacking in those cultural adaptive skills due to the tendency to address Otherness by promoting the idea of white superiority derived from the principle of "the White Man's burden."

As Ken Gelder emphasizes, Dracula is so dangerous for Victorian England because, paradoxically, his identity is more defined than the British (12). Since he is subject to multiple cultural influences, this character is possibly an "every-man," an individual living on the *limes* between any nation and none. Stephen Arata describes this in-betweenness as constitutive of Stoker's narrative, where the author attributes to Dracula opposite features balancing "civilized and primitive, colonizer and colonized, victimizer (either imperialist or vampire) and victim" (626). Therefore, Dracula's dangerousness resides in his border-crossing ability which, according to Gelder, "signif(ies) nothing less than his irreducible Otherness"(13) and is synonym for his status as stranger.

Indeed, Dracula is Other because of his cultural diversity yet he is also perceived as the Same. His dangerousness resides in his uncomfortable role as uncanny reminder for the British of their imperial ways. He "invades" London by sea, he biologically colonizes women (Lucy and, later, Mina) (Arata 633, Kwan-Wai Yu 160) to spread his progeny, and he even increases his fortune on British soil by acquiring several properties in London. Therefore, his ways are blatantly referring to the Imperial *modus operandi* adopted to expand dominions over other populations, with the only uncanny exception that now "the natives are the British" (Arata 639).

Along with the fear of cultural hybridization, Dracula is also surrounded by the anxieties of the fading British Empire as an economic and political power at the end of the nineteenth century (Arata 622, Kwan-Wai Yu 146). The vampire in Stoker's novels is a "hoarder of money and gold" (Gelder 14) and this, to a Victorian mind, recalled anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish people.² Because of their ability to move capital across nations, as Dracula actually does buying

2. The immigrant Jewish people's flow from Eastern Europe was an important example of population shift between the end of the 1880s and World War I. Many Jews, mainly from Poland and Russia, ran away from the poor social and economic conditions they had to endure in those countries and reached London looking for a better future

his British estate at Carfax, Jews have the economic power to potentially threaten the British Empire:

The 'Jew', like Dracula, must be restricted precisely because he moves money so easily through so many nations. The internationalisation of capital disturbs national identity; money changes hands and crosses boundaries; it is mobile, nomadic, 'polyphonic', everywhere 'at home'. (Gelder 16)

Money is not British anymore; it is contaminated by its very mobility. Hence the necessity to restrict and contain immigration-vampirism by any means necessary, whether it be creating ghettos for immigrants in London or killing Dracula with a wooden stake. In the attempt to re-establish the social equilibrium, the bourgeois-shaped Crew of the Light³ shows a "quasi-religious sense of high duty and ascetic hard work" (Kwan-Wai Yu 146) to fight the vampire. According to Kwan-Wai Yu, this responds to Max Weber's theories connecting Protestant ethics to work which exhorts individuals to actively eradicate "the demonic Other" (150), synonym for the irrational spirit of capitalism. Indeed, Dracula represents the finest image of a ruthless capital-seeker.

The Marxist interpretation of the vampire as a negative example of monopolist is shared by several critics (Gelder 17-18, Kwan-Wai Yu 152). As Marx noted, "capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (Marx, 1: 342). Because Dracula acts out this pattern both physically and metaphorically, he represents extreme capitalism and, therefore, he must die to turn capitalism once again into "an 'organic' process with a 'human face' which uses money responsibly and sensibly" (Gelder 17). In other words, Dracula's death is a metaphoric, cathartic event which re-establishes the very principles of economic liberalism and freedom, as opposed to the "'irresistible forces' to consume and accumulate" typical of a capitalist approach to economy (20).

To articulate further the concept associating vampirism to Otherness, Gelder refers to Fredric Jameson's "Magical Narratives" chapter in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). This chapter contains a very interesting account about the influence of fantasy texts on readers, where Jameson discusses, among other things, the presence of the Other in this type of narration. According to Jameson, images of Otherness provide legitimacy for the representation of subordination and dominance in these texts (42). This representation ultimately shapes the identity of the subjects involved. Thus, it is likely that because narratives of vampirization are tales of Otherness by definition, they are particularly apt at representing the tensions in a given socio-cultural context and the relations established among the groups operating in that context.

(Knepper 62-63). However, once in the city they were often dragged into the stream of criminality, usury and prostitution, especially around the notorious East End area. This social problem worsened the already widespread anti-Semitic public opinion and the prejudices surrounding Jewish people, even if it was not the actual origin. Indeed, according to Knepper, "the racialisation of crime did not originate with reference to Jews; Britain already possessed equations of stranger, crime, and race in which to factor the immigrants who began to arrive in the 1880s" (62). The political acme of this process was the establishment of restrictions such as the Aliens Act (1905), which imposed severe restrictions on immigration.

3. In *Dracula* "The Crew of the Light" is a sort of association formed by Abraham Van Helsing, Jonathan and Mina Harker, Arthur Holmwood and Quincey Morris voted to defeat Dracula after he supposedly turned Lucy Westenra into a vampire.

This is because of the very nature of the fantasy text. To quote Gelder, the Gothic particularly “problemati[zes] identity” (42), obscuring the limits and boundaries imposed by the terms through which the identity is defined.

To sum up, the vampires’ identity is Otherness on different levels: cultural, political and economic. The list of features seems to be very long: they are the possibility of cultural hybridization and loss of national identity, they provoke social contamination resulting from the contact with subject groups external to the host society, they embody racist stereotypes and they foster associations with Marxist capitalist theories, all at once.⁴ As Gelder notices, the process connecting vampirism to Otherness is a trend which can be traced until recent times in the vast criticism of this literary (23) and, recently, cinematic phenomenon. This is because, despite the different representations offered, the vampires’ Otherness is a common key which gathers them all into a common interpretation. In these narratives, the vampire is always described as an outsider, a stranger in every host society he reaches, yet familiarly recognized as a mirror of that society’s weakness. Thus, he represents a menace to the various images of itself that society has developed. To quote Gelder, the vampire is “unassimilated – as a ‘cosmopolitan’ or internationalised character who is excessive to national identities, whose lack of restraint threatens the very *notion* of identity” (23). At the same time, vampires are paradoxical signifiers of the inevitable process leading to the disappearance of cultural diversity, like Dracula, whose unclear identity ultimately represents “a globalizing world in which minority cultures and languages are increasingly threatened with assimilation and extinction” (Viragh 232).

1.3 The Canon and the Modern American Vampire

As discussed in the previous section, critics have written widely on the association of Count Dracula with the concept of Otherness. Nonetheless, the connection between vampires and diversity has been the object of consistent changes in contemporary characters. The progressive shift from the classical *Nosferatu* figures to their modern counterparts in *Interview with the Vampire* influenced the meanings constructed around their Otherness, and for this reason, it would be valuable to explore their evolution further. Not only did the changes in the representation of vampires affect the printed page, but also the screen, where the visual aspect of the medium made these characteristics even more evident.

From the beginning of his appearance on the screen the vampire was usually identified with the character of Count Dracula and his portrayal was mainly influenced by the so-called “Ruthven formula” (Richards-Bodart 5-6). We owe its origins to John Polidori, who wrote *The Vampyre* in 1816, the first vampire tale in Western literature.⁵ Ruthven, the undead protagonist of

4. The list could be further expanded by referring to the flourishing academic studies on vampire literature and movies. One of the most common critical approaches adopted is the study of the vampire through psychoanalytic-Freudian theories. From time to time, the figure of the vampire was associated with traumatic experiences affecting memory (Kahder), Oedipal complexes (Gelder 67), uncanny recognitions (Kwan-Wai Yu 154), supposedly deviant (and not) sexual behaviours (Craft, Stevenson, Schopp 235-236) and lack of boundaries between queer and heterosexual relations (Gelder 57-63, McCrea, Kwan-Wai Yu 147-149), exorcism of the fears of venereal disease (Benefiel 262, Richards-Bodart 13), and necrophilia and obsession with bodily decay and death (Gelder xi).

5. However, it is necessary to clarify that vampires had already a large place in folklore and legends, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, of individuals who rose from the dead to drink the blood of the living. They were

the tale, was inspired by Lord Byron, a fact which probably contributed to end the friendship between the two authors (5). This is unsurprising, given Ruthven's derogatory appearance as an attractive yet wicked creature, "cold, calculating, intelligent, frequently killing those that he wanted or needed out of his way" (6). Nonetheless, Polidori established that set of features associated with the vampire which still echoes in many literary and cinematic adaptations today. He described Ruthven as a bloodthirsty undead with supernatural powers (i.e. hypnotism), yet also a resemblance to a normal human being; the character was also a fascinating, wealthy aristocrat, whose "bite was erotic and overwhelming" (Richards-Bodart 6).

After Polidori, *Varney the Vampyre* (1847) by James Malcom Rymer and *Carmilla* (1871) by Joseph Sheridan-LeFanu were the most famous vampires on the literary scene, with a few disturbing changes to the pattern.⁶ Then, of course, *Dracula* was the milestone which set all these features together, turning vampire literature into a unique phenomenon on the printed page first and, later, on the screen. According to Joni Richards-Bodart, his success was incomparable because Stoker had the ability to create a new myth from the ashes of cultural, historical and folkloric references (9), while mastering it to provide a truthful yet obscure portrayal of Victorian society.

Following the literary patterns, the first vampires on the screen were always represented as male, as cold monsters with no hints of feelings except for their need to drink the blood of their victims, usually innocent young girls. The depiction of the vampire offered by F.W. Murnau's Count Orlock in *Nosferatu* (1922), Bela Lugosi's portrayal of Count Dracula (1931), followed by Christopher Lee's version of the character in the 1970s influenced significantly the cinematographic canon in this way. In those years, the vampire's features were often identified with the famous actors playing this character. This identification contributed to a mysterious aura around the vampire both on and off-screen. In Richards-Bodart's view, the cinematographic features of the classic vampire were set on a specific pattern of endlessly repeated elements:

[...] Pale skin, fangs, black cape, fear of garlic, [...] [the vampire] can be burned or hurt by holy water or religious relics, no reflection in mirrors, needs to be invited to come into home, evil, frightening, mesmerizing [...] This vamp was very dangerous, and stories about him weren't told from his point of view, but from the hunter's or the victim's. The setting was dark and creepy, very gothic, unfamiliar, and a long way away from the reader's real world, emphasizing the differences between vampire and human. (11)

"revenants," bestial creatures with no will or purpose other than drinking human blood. At a certain point, the nineteenth century experienced a "vampire hysteria," for which people used to blame vampires for the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis, or other awful events (Richards-Bodart 3). Indeed, the causes of tuberculosis were little known and its victims after death showed supposedly signs of "vampirization," which today forensic medicine explains as the normal decay of the body after death (4). Also, this process has often involved a very interesting sociological feature: the use of scapegoats to justify apparently extraordinary events (Corn and Dunn 141) and to re-establish equilibrium in a given community.

6. *Varney*, for example, was the first vampire in print to neglect his demonic nature, so much so that he committed suicide at the end of the novel by throwing himself in the lava of Mount Vesuvius. For her part, *Carmilla* was the first female vampire to have relevance in a literary work. She was portrayed as a lesbian vampire, thus she was considered even more dangerous in emphasizing the sexual connection between biting and sucking blood with a female subject (Richards-Bodart 6-7).

These features remained unchanged until relatively recently. After Stoker's *Dracula*, the second important shift in the canon was represented by Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and, later, its movie adaptation (1994).⁷ Yet, despite these differences, the audience was able to relate to the vampire and develop mixed feelings which included both attraction to and rejection of the character. Rice's innovation was developing for the first time a creature with whom the audience could identify, as "she humanize(d) the vampire without taking away our fear and fascination with him" (Richards-Bodart 12). Her vampire Louis was not just a monster any more but a monster with a soul. His killing and feeding were characterized by a deep moral dichotomy which constituted a significant innovation for the genre. This was possible in part because Rice's writing style was different from her predecessors. Unlike most vampire literature until the 1970s, Rice made the vampire the narrator of the events. In other words, for the first time the readers could enter the vampire's mind and understand that they could find something more behind the monster.

While so far vampires were dull creatures with no hints of a conscience, Louis showed regrets when feeding on people, thus erasing the opposition between pure goodness and pure evil typical of the classical canon (12). This innovation allowed the vampire to acquire a more rounded personality and, finally, a human side. Had we to define the main feature of the modern vampire, probably his in-betweenness or, better, his ability to live on the subtle lines dividing light and darkness, would be the most prominent. As Richards-Bodart emphasizes:

This new vamp walks a narrow line between monster and human – he must balance the new qualities he has been given with the older ones he has had for centuries and that have made him continually fascinating and popular. [...] While they are still killers, [...] they can be tortured by their need to kill. [...] The new vampire has been secularized, socialized, and humanized. While *Dracula* only felt dark emotions – hunger, hate, bitterness – today's vampires relate to other vampires and humans in a variety of ways, and can experience love, guilt, friendship, jealousy, regret, doubt, as well as the ability to question themselves and their motivations. (12-13)

The possibility for the audience to feel closer to the vampire opened the path for the more contemporary versions of the vampires in the 1990s, such as Angel and Spike, for example, in the TV series *Buffy* (1997-2003). They were the most prominent examples of vampires in the late 1990s who followed the pattern of the domesticated vampire, being both in love with the human Slayer Buffy, while harbouring an appealing, troublesome dark side. Therefore, vampires began to be represented as both a "hero and a bad boy, all wrapped up in one person" (17). Angel and Spike loved Buffy and were even ready to sacrifice themselves for her while helping her in her

7. It is necessary to specify that the movie adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* was not actually the very first representation of a vampire with a soul in an audiovisual adaptation of the genre. The vampire Barnabas Collins, protagonist of the famous American TV show *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971), was the first example of a dark creature with a conscience who wanted to achieve redemption for his deeds. Later, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) by Francis Ford Coppola, showed a more human side to the character of the Count contrary to the previous adaptations of the novel. Here, Coppola explained that the reason behind Dracula's damnation and fall, as well as his cathartic death, is his love for Elisabeta/Mina Murray. However, the vampire was still represented mainly as a monster to eliminate, thus fitting in the classic canon.

fight against evil, yet they were still demons ready to kill if necessary (and when not).

If we consider Nina Auerbach's statement that every society and every culture creates the vampires it wants and it deserves (*Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 5-6), it is possible to understand why the evolution of the vampire went through these numerous shifts. Victorian England created a vampire that reminded readers how Otherness could be inescapable even in one's own home. Likewise, America created the vampire myth it needed to fulfil its most secret desires and, ultimately, to cope with an unsatisfactory reality. The American vampire is, of course, still Other because he lives in the grey area between good and bad. However, this liminal position gives him the power to attract audiences and readers, especially young female ones. This is because he represents danger yet he is sexy and seems to incarnate the twenty-first-century ideal man:

[The modern vampire's] attraction to [the girl] overwhelms everything else in his life as soon as he sees her for the first time. He loves her beyond measure, is devoted and committed only to her, and wants to cherish and protect her as long as they live. He's also brooding, aloof, and just a little bit dangerous, forbidden and appealing because he seems to have everything, wealth and beauty. (Richards-Bodart 16)

This generic description could be applied to Eric and Bill in *True Blood* or Edward of the *Twilight* saga, another recent vampire narrative, without much effort, thus placing them in the latest generation of vampire-heroes. They are the "American dream man." And, as if all this were not enough, all of them are immortal, often super-strong and gifted with one or multiple powers. In other words, they represent a world beyond the constraints of rules, even beyond physics (and likely death), a world where anything could be possible. Vampires are alluring because their very existence denies the ugly reality of the real world and of the U.S. especially, where people's agency is limited by external factors such as racism, public and private violence and the impact of the economic crisis. Vampires' almost God-like power operates beyond life and death, nurturing fantasies of absolute control and omnipotence. Therefore, through them the audiences are carried away with the illusion of control over a disastrous political and social situation and the comfort of a reality where anything could happen. As Schopp notes:

In the case of the contemporary vampire, [...] myth provides a space in which the audience can subvert social order, as well as experience both sublimated and conscious desires. [...] The vampire represents an unknown that may be threatening, but that also exposes the culturally repressed. The contemporary vampire's otherness configures its world as a place to act out fantasies and desires without the constraint of human socio-cultural, sexual or even physical mandates. (232-233)

This shift to the vampire-hero progressively opened up an unprecedented cultural process which may be reasonably defined as a further stage in the evolution of vampires. They almost became a new form of religion: they were *cult*, objectified, turning into the very essence of consumerism. This, along with American cultural anxieties, caused their proliferation in a variety of media and representations, and helps explain the fandom created around *True Blood* and other vampire products such as *Twilight*. Both production companies and writers understood this trend and saw a good opportunity to offer products oriented around the contemporary vampire, so

much so that “the producers of pop culture have capitalized on the vampire’s current marketability, and have created a diverse spectrum of cultural product” (232).

The worldwide success of the *Twilight* saga (2008-2012) represents the acme of this new trend. Adapted from Stephenie Meyer’s best-selling novels, the series relies on the figure of the new domesticated vampire to especially appeal the female audience. The “vegetarian”⁸ vampire Edward Cullen has become the new model for the vampire hero and his love story with the human Bella Swan has revived the genre for younger audiences. The saga falls within “a broader cultural tradition of concatenating Eros (love) and Thanatos (death)” (34), using the vampire’s archetypal references to sexuality and necrophilia. Anthea Taylor argues that the *Twilight* vampire narrative re-inscribes itself within the eroticization of violence of the nineteenth century romance, when heterosexual “tropes of eroticized domination prevailed” (34) through the marketing of the “Byronic hero” model to women. In this way, the narrative structure of *Twilight* resembles the usual clichés of young-adult romances, and its protagonists follow those established stereotypes which contribute to the repetitiveness and, ultimately success, of this genre.

Despite its use of many cinematographic (and literary) conventions, the most interesting aspect of the *Twilight* saga is the revival of the fantasy setting within the trite formula of the high-school romance. Indeed, Edward’s family depiction as a normal (upper-class) American family allows the audience to sympathize with the vampires because of the similarity with the human lifestyle. However, a significant narrative twist occurs when the Cullens’ real identity is revealed: all of them are vampires. Not only is the inclusion of this supernatural element a narrative device to trigger the audience’s attention⁹ and possibly revive the genre, but it is also an attempt to draw on the features of the modern vampire, who is rendered as less threatening due to his conformity with bourgeois social norms.

1.4 Identifying Issues: American Vampirism and Otherness

The following section offers a general overview of the issues to be addressed more in

8. The use of the word vegetarian seems to be semantically problematic. In the *Twilight* series, the Cullens use it to imply that their dietary choices exclude drinking human blood due to ethical reasons while the killing of animals, which are nonetheless living beings, is justified as a way to provide blood supplies. This topic of the *Twilight* lore has not been fully explored by the criticism compared to other themes present in the saga. However, for further information on this topic see Kazez.

9. The youngest targets in the audience use contemporary vampire romance as a way to reinforce their own identity and are offered a powerful teenage model to look at, recognizing “the most appealing characteristics of the vampire as self-identity, power, sexuality and marginality” (Richards-Bodart 14). The vampire’s connection to the audience’s psychological self-recognition in the monster is definitely not a new trend, considering Count Dracula’s symbolization of Victorian nineteenth-century anxieties. However, in the context of the contemporary vampire romance, rather than exorcizing young adults’ fears, the vampire Otherness offers adolescents a character to emulate in the quest for self-affirmation typical of teenage years: “Teens question who they are and what their life, their existence means, and they are struggling to create their own philosophy. The vampire stands in stark contrast to this. He knows who he is and why he exists. [...] He knows his place in his world and is comfortable and confident in it. [...] His certainty about his identity and purpose cannot be but attractive to adolescents who are so uncertain about theirs” (Richards-Bodart 14).

depth in my work. It briefly describes and summarizes the relation between the modern vampire's Otherness and modern U.S. society. The American vampire brings Otherness back through the contemporary adaptations of *True Blood* and *Interview with the Vampire*. As explored in the first part of this chapter, the association between the vampire and the concept of Otherness is a well-established *Leitmotif* which nurtured vampire literature and movies for generations. However, the American vampire protagonists of these two stories offer a unique take on U.S. contemporary society and its culture, offering different and even contradictory portrayals of the most uncomfortable issues haunting American society today. These issues include race, class, wealth distribution and power dynamics. For this reason, my thesis will consider the media adaptations of Charlaine Harris' books and use side references to Anne Rice's novel to explore the issue of Otherness in the Southern regions of the United States.

My interest in a regional study originates from the type of Otherness associated with the vampires in the *True Blood* narrative and their position with respect to the other socio-cultural groups portrayed. In particular, the fact that *True Blood* offers opposing portrayals of American vampires needs to be addressed further to investigate the reasons behind this unclear, fragmented perception of Otherness in U.S. society. One of the most relevant features which influence this narrative more than we could expect is precisely its location in a specific area of the United States. Jennifer Dimming, who points out that in modern vampire narratives "the setting is that of small towns in America, but there are nevertheless differences between them" (Dimming 10), nonetheless considers these differences as indicators of different target audiences¹⁰ rather than as signifiers of the American sociological context.

Dimming's work is just one example of criticism that has found the settings of *True Blood* and other contemporary vampire narratives to be significant. Nonetheless, the settings of these narratives have only been explored as part of the Gothic, while leaving their cultural and social value in the background. For example, Dimming's dissertation argues that the contemporary Gothic in the *True Blood* books uses non-threatening and everyday locations to set the tone because "the vampire novel today does not have to exist within the Gothic genre and therefore does not have to follow the same rules that the early vampire novels did [...] Today the vampire novel does not have to have a castle in the setting at all and can take place almost anywhere" (7).

Dimming's analysis of the *True Blood* setting is clearly more focused on its value to and relation with the traditional vampire literature. However, to my knowledge, current criticism has not focused specifically on the implications between the regional setting of the *True Blood* vampires and potential cultural pitfalls in their representation of Otherness. Therefore, my approach will be to explore this TV adaptation through American cultural lenses rather than

10. Dimming also focuses on the *Twilight* saga to support her analysis of the setting of contemporary vampire narratives. She states that the high-school setting in *Twilight* and the bar setting in *True Blood* are a clear hint of the increasing presence of the connection between vampires and sexuality in these two different narrations, obviously considering *True Blood* as the product targeted to an older audience. Thus, the *Twilight* audience seems to be younger than the *True Blood* one, although I would not argue such an age distinction to be particularly significant as an indicator of a type of reader, since the *Twilight* saga has proven to appeal not only a teenage audience but also a more mature target.

following exclusively the traditional literary criticism on the figure of the vampire. This is possible because the *True Blood* narrative is a product of U.S. society which highlights some cultural features more prevalent in the regional area where it is set. Thus, it offers a regionalized opinion about the American vampire's identity and, in general, on the state of contemporary American culture. *True Blood* particularly associates vampires with tropes of American whiteness and economic success tied to the dynamics of capitalism, while it relegates the human characters in the show to working class groups. This portrayal consequently highlights social inequalities in the human-vampire relationships in the show and leads to many questions about the myths of the American Dream and openness favoured in the United States, which is often perceived in the collective imaginary as a land of equality and shared opportunities.

This tendency to social allegory is reinforced by the *True Blood* vampires' other face. In the setting of the deep Southern Louisianan landscape, these creatures are also a *de facto* minority, and even if they have revealed their existence to the world, they are outcasts often persecuted by religious fanatics and never fully accepted by mainstream society. In many aspects, the racism experienced by the *True Blood* vampires recalls the struggles for recognition and equality experienced by the African-Americans in the South during the 1960s. Therefore, vampires seem here to be associated with tropes of blackness. Vampires are represented as an ethnic minority racially opposed to the humans who have established relations of power and dominance over them. Interestingly, this is subverted again in *Interview with the Vampire*, where the vampires Louis and Lestat are associated again with tropes of whiteness and wealth. They are white, privileged aristocrats in 1791 Louisiana who, as opposed to their characters in the film, do not hesitate to live on the earnings of Louis' plantation, along with the work – and blood – of his slaves.

1.5 Methodological Approach to Media Studies in the Project

My analysis will mainly involve the cinematographic and television versions of Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Reference to the written texts will be made when they support my study and to better clarify the sociological and cultural issues exposed. To justify my methodological approach, it is first necessary briefly to address one of the central issues of media studies. The relationship between literature and its adaptation in other media forms such as cinema and television has been widely debated. The implications which such a relation brings to the surface are several, and in particular whether these different media are subordinated to one another and how eventually to approach their comparative analysis. Until not long ago, the most common perspective on this issue implied that because adaptations derive from another existing textual form they exist only as an appendix to the written text, since they are chronologically bound to it. However, contemporary criticism has abandoned this outdated vision to develop a new approach where literature and media relate to each other, regardless of chronological precedence. Vicente Luis Mora rightly notes that we now consider them as forms of transmedia storytelling. They constitute together a corpus of texts creating a complex narrative universe rather than one simply being the product of the other (16). Álvaro Llosa Sanz notes that we need “to re-evaluate the literary tradition in terms of fictional universes, in history worlds which manifest themselves through different supports adopting diversified semiotic ways” (49, translation mine). If we frame the relation between literature and media texts in this way,

adaptations and literary texts do not respond to a precise hierarchy according to a pre-established degree of importance.

In this way, the narrative corpus as a whole becomes the dominant aspect in criticism. Although the media composing the corpus produce two different languages of analysis, the distinction between them may even become blurred in the analysis itself. Harris' novels and *True Blood* may likely fall in the category of transmedia, if we consider its mere formal definition as "expansion of the story into a different media" (Mora 24), since this TV show adds new narrative lines to the original literary corpus. Given this background, my methodological approach will mainly involve the analysis of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* adaptations because they offer a more direct cultural understanding of the issues object of this study.

Because movies and TV series rely on images, dialogue and sound to communicate contents using a limited span of time, fast pacing and conciseness are the most remarkable aspects of this medium, as opposed to a written text, where themes are dispersed throughout the length of the work and often require several layers of interpretation. Therefore, cultural aspects, which sometimes include undertones hard to detect, may become more evident as they are adapted on the screen instead of being deduced from the written page. Indeed, the relevance of media in general as indicators of contemporary culture should not be underestimated. This is actually one of the core ideas leading media studies today and justifies the importance of considering *True Blood* as the main focus of this work. As Julian McDougall writes in *Media Studies: The Basics*, we study media because they are our "everyday life – mine, yours, and everybody else's. [...] Media are so central to our existence that we can't really separate 'the media' from everything else" (5). Even though they do not follow a unifying canon, media are nonetheless the very expression of the society producing them. They are tailored to convey specific messages because, like literature, "we end up being told what we should consider to be the most valuable products within it" (8).

In sociological terms, for example, it is possible to understand a lot about movie characters' social and cultural background just by interpreting their clothing, way of speaking and sometimes even body language. Considering other aspects such as the *mise-en-scène*, for example, it is possible to collect details on the products consumed by the characters, on the American setting and the socio-economic dynamics it represents. Indeed, as McDougall points out, the ambience of a scene is important because "these micro-elements add up to the construction of the verisimilitude – a logical sense of realism [...] which attempts to convince us that it is an authentic representation of the existing social world, whether fictional or not" (42-43). However, the process of adapting texts always requires making stylistic choices and sometimes painful cuts from the original source, so that part of the message and cultural meaning is inevitably lost. As the word itself suggests, "adapt" also means adjust the narrative structure and content of the printed page into images. In my case, the preference for the movie adaptations of vampire fiction does not imply any implicit judgement about the hierarchical relation between the TV series and the novels, but it is merely instrumental to the nature of my project.

Because they belong to different media and express themselves in languages which are not fully comparable (the language of the written word and the cinematographic language),

establishing a subordination between the two would constitute a methodological mistake. The value of contemporary cinema in American mass culture and, therefore, its relevance to my own cultural analysis. Indeed, regardless of the quality and nature of the movies coming out of contemporary Hollywood, cinema has become an integral part of American society while acting as its mirror. “Cinema is everywhere a fact in our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversations, and our perceptions of each other and of self,” comments Daniel Bernardi on the cultural values of contemporary American movies (xvi).

1.6 Historical Background: Contemporary American Culture and Regional Peculiarities through the Fractures of the American Civil War

“Products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Kellner 7). To frame this point in a larger context, media are one of the channels through which culture expresses itself and, as such, they influence people’s identities. Through their role as informative facilitators, media provide implicit guidelines for individuals’ behaviours and habits and thus determine socially and culturally acceptable standards. According to Douglas Kellner, media allow us to understand “how to dress, look and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions” (7). In this way, movies, as well as other media forms, such as television, radio and newspapers, function as the mirror of mainstream cultural values and of contemporary society, while articulating “political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era” (8).

If we consider the *True Blood* series as a form of media we can see how this product contributes representing America today and its potential cultural fractures. It conveys the state of American society, defining both its social standards and contradictions. As Kellner notes: “Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed, and that [it] is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics” (8). Therefore, in order to lead an accurate analysis of *True Blood* it is necessary to define the values of contemporary American culture.

The following section provides a brief historical and cultural contextualization which will be relevant for the analysis of this media text. This section will draw attention to the specific cultural values to be analyzed in *True Blood*, which indicate specific features of the American South. However, this section is not intended to provide an exhaustive inventory of the issues addressed in this work but to rather provide a general introduction for the chapters to follow. The most relevant American values to be included in my study are in the sense of independence, self-reliance, white Calvinist hard-working attitude, materialistic success and egalitarianism. While these values¹¹ are shared by American culture as a whole, the American South has been more

11. These values should neither be considered as the only ones shaping American culture nor be perceived as set in stone. Precisely because culture is the result of multiple categories, as well as more or less consistent influences from other cultures, it is challenging to define American values given the complexity of cultural systems in general. This concept is well described by Gary Weaver, who asserts that “culture is like an iceberg” (9). Thus, on the one

drawn to identify from time to time with specific ones depending on the regional and historical development.

Although it is difficult to highlight specific values over others due to the complexity of cultural systems, as well as to unfold and critically address prejudices and stereotypes, it is not completely impossible to do so. If the analysis is centred on the actual historical development of a country to filter the values which each specific culture projects on the surface, it is viable to understand and distinguish actual cultural values from mere external preconceptions. Often described as a “melting pot,” until the late twentieth century America was stereotypically considered a cradle “stirred and heated until the various cultures melt together” (Weaver 10), lacking a dominant mainstream culture. The myth of multiculturalism has proven to be incorrect because even if the United States is indeed culturally diverse, it is “a contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance” (Kellner 8).

In addition, according to Gary Weaver, the idea that the United States does not have a mainstream culture is equally prejudicial. The core values of American culture derive from the direct influence of “a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male mold or shape” (10), which later formed the basis for other values as well. Rather than offering a hybridized multicultural identity like the “melting pot”, this “cookie-cutter” mold provided people with a standardized model to pursue. This is a particularly powerful way to absorb and normalize immigration flows within American socio-cultural structure, as Weaver notes (10). Indeed, one of the main features of American culture has always been the possibility for immigrants to integrate with mainstream American society, provided that they were white and willing to conform linguistically and socially to the Protestant American model while giving up their own specific heritage.

The consequence for successful integration was – and somehow still is – obtaining economic benefits because “those who could fit the cultural cookie-cutter mold advanced more easily and quickly than those who could not” (10). From Weaver’s perspective, this also implies racial fractures within the American population, where the distinction between whiteness and non-whiteness is a strong social marker determining access to privileges and economic advantages. Due to their external appearance, minorities such as American Indians, Mexican Americans and African Americans have always lived at the edges of society because “even if they mastered English and mainstream values and behaviors, [they] were identifiably different and therefore were easily excluded from the dominant culture” (10).

This trend is unsurprising if we analyze the development of the United States as a nation. Historically, the United States was born on the ashes of the European colonization based on

hand, it is composed of surface elements which are most noticeable, usually identified with specific behaviours. On the other hand, “beneath the water level of awareness” (9) culture includes beliefs and, at its core, cultural values which constitute the basis of those external behaviours, “our way of thinking and perceiving” (9). According to Weaver, when a cultural system comes into contact with structures founded on different cultural values, this condition increases possibilities for hybridization as well as conflicts which result from the clashing between the different worldviews. As a consequence, cross-cultural experiences have the power to influence individuals’ perceptions about cultural diversity and sameness, as “the collision of internal cultures causes us to become more aware of the differences and similarities between cultural values” (10). Therefore, identifying the core values of a specific culture is often challenging because of the multiplicity of factors and subjects involved in the process.

settlement, exploitation of natural resources and the progressive subordination of the local Aboriginal populations. Conrad Arensberg and Arthur Niehoff, along with Weaver, claim that the first wave of settlement was characterized by “criminals who were sent to the ‘New World’ by the British” (Arensberg and Niehoff 11) and Puritan-oriented immigrants who escaped religious persecution to express freely their beliefs without retaliation from the central authorities (Arensberg and Niehoff 30; Weaver 10). However, as Arensberg and Niehoff point out, even if defined as “new”, this world actually relied on a few of the old European social and philosophical structures which aided in constituting the core of the still-to-be United States:

Anglo-Saxon civil rights, the rule of law, and representative institutions were inherited from the English background; ideas for egalitarian democracy and a secular spirit spring from the French and the American Revolution. The period of slavery and its aftermath, and the European immigration of three centuries, have affected American character strongly. (30)

Despite this heritage, the lack of an established social hierarchy identified the “New World” as a dreamland where people could flee economic disadvantages while hoping for social advancement, unlike Europe.¹² American cultural values were deeply influenced by the freedom of “the life on the frontier, the great open spaces, the virgin wealth, and the seemingly limitless resources” (Arensberg and Niehoff 30). While shared by the American collective imagery as a whole, the myth of the frontier¹³ is in fact more relevant for the American West and Pacific Northwest regions. Nonetheless, the inclusion of their regional values in this section is specifically relevant to understand the cultural milieu and the development of the United States as a nation.

In order to understand the cultural values prevalent in the American South, it is necessary to refer briefly to another defining moment of U.S. history: the American Civil War (1861-1865), to be addressed more extensively in the chapter about *True Blood*. The conflict culminated with the secession of the Southern areas from the United States leading to a bloody internal turmoil which separated the country in half for four years. While the Northern states remained faithful to the Union and to the central authorities, the Southern areas gathered under the aegis of the Confederation and claimed their independence, both economic and political. The war shook the world power balance and questioned the very existence of the United States as a nation which, as Edward L. Ayers suggests, “was still very much an experiment in 1860” (54). Indeed, U.S. sense of national identity was based on the submission to the law rather than a shared cultural heritage like in the Old World countries (54).

The reasons behind the increasing contrasts between the North and South were mainly political and economic. The North started to rely heavily on progressive industrialization to

12. In the Old World “there was no realistic hope of escaping poverty and oppression. There was little change in life. If you were born poor, you died poor” (Weaver 11).

13. This topic has been widely discussed by Richard Slotkin in his trilogy about the myth of the frontier and its value in American society. He especially focused on the idea that American culture derives from the anxieties and hardships endured by European settlers at the time of Western expansion and that the myth of the frontier is at the core of national identity. In particular, see *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973).

advance the economy, improving transportation systems and third sector services. On the contrary, the economy of the Southern states was flourishing using different assets, mainly agriculture, the plantation system and the institution of slavery. As Ayers points out, “the slaves of the South were worth more than all the railroads and factories of the North and South combined; slavery was good business and shrewd investment” (55). All these aspects combined enriched local landowners through the increased market price of cotton. As a result, the price of slaves, who were effectively considered a form of property, rose consistently, and “by 1860 the per capita wealth of Southern whites was twice that of Northerners, and three-fifths of the wealthiest individuals in the country were Southerners” (Hassler and Weber). Driven both by ethical issues and interests of protecting free labour, the central government started seriously debating finally abolishing slavery. This caused secessionist feelings to spread in the South as a response to the potential endangerment of the Southern economy.

The conflict over slavery in those years led America to struggle with the idea of national identity itself. The South was questioning the sense of both civic and ethnic nationalism.¹⁴ According to James McPherson, the South claimed independence because it started to perceive the Northerners as people “with increasingly separated interests” (104). In addition, the sense of not belonging to the United States was justified by the “myth of Southern ethnic nationalism” (105), which was spiritually affiliated with the European nationalist movements uniting people with shared ethnic backgrounds. Southerners claimed to be descendants of “the Norman conquerors by way of the English Cavaliers of the seventeenth century” (105) rather than of the Protestant pioneers living on the frontier and, thus, they felt culturally opposed to the Yankee “Goths and Vandals” (107).¹⁵ Despite the dreams of independence, the lack of organization and supply transportation led the Confederation slowly to lose the war, somehow proving that the Union’s sense of patriotism and civic duty was stronger than any claim for cultural autonomy.

If we consider, on the one hand, the debate over Southern ethnic nationalism and, on the other hand, the myth of the frontier influencing the Northwest of the United States, it is possible to understand how capitalism has become the dominant system in the country and how the South has reacted to it. First of all, the influence of the Calvinist (Puritan) religion on the myth of the lone hero within American culture has facilitated the development of a capitalist economy in the country during the nineteenth and twentieth century.¹⁶ The Calvinist model promoted “individual

14. According to James McPherson, civic and ethnic nationalism are the most relevant forms of nationalism developed by modern societies. Civic nationalism is the people’s sense of belonging to a nation based on “the common [...] citizenship and [...] allegiance to the institutions governing that territory” (103), whereas ethnic nationalism relates to the sense of identity provided by a shared cultural background based on “language, religion, culture, and – the most subjective factor – a belief in the common genetic or biological descent of the group” (103).

15. Interestingly, the Union was more focused on the Southern infringement of civic nationalism rather than its striving for cultural independence. In other words, the Northern states framed this act of rebellion as a violation of the Southern citizens’ civil duties to the American nation. For this reason, because they identified themselves with patriotic beliefs, they became the defenders of the central authority to which they pledged their trust. As McPherson notes, “Union soldiers professed to fight for the symbols and institutions of civic nationalism. In this they followed the lead of their president [Lincoln]” (107). It was their firm belief that fighting for the Union was a duty to safeguard the values of democracy on which the 1789 Constitution was based, as well as the territorial integrity of the nation.

16. For further information about the influence of Puritanism on American identity and Puritan beliefs as a model

responsibility and [...] positive work ethic” (30), generated from the belief that God rewarded hard workers and individual efforts to improve socially and economically (Weaver 11). These beliefs injected American culture with qualities such as risk-taking and self-reliance, which resulted in a strong sense of independence, at individual, social and political levels, rather than the sense of collectivity. These qualities have later shown to be highly rewarded in the capitalist system, where they have proved to be fundamental for the success of the capitalist money-making process. As Weaver notes, these qualities seem also a fair consequence of the life of the frontier itself, which introduced the “cowboy role-model” into American culture to support the Calvinist hard-working ethic:

When Americans think of a cowboy, they picture a lone individual sitting on a horse out on the prairie. Cowboys never traveled in groups. They were men of action, self-reliant and independent individualists who survived without any help from anyone else. For Americans, the cowboy is a Calvinist on horseback and represents the dominant values of this society. (14)

The second important aspect which will be part of my analysis is the influence of the sense of independence and achievement-oriented attitude within American social structures. In particular, the notion of family seems to be at the center of American cultural values. While the concept of an enlarged family was progressively abandoned, nuclear family bonds were adapted to the harsh life of the frontier and were retained only through the connection among “the husband, wife and children, but not the grandparents, aunts uncles or other relatives” (14-15). Lacking established social and familiar networks of the kind seen in Europe and other countries, the American achievement-oriented attitude influenced not only the notion of family but also individuals’ social relations with each other. In the United States individuals were, and still are, identified with their occupations and personal success rather than with their social or familiar affiliations, shaping the United States as a “do-culture” as Weaver points out. In this way, American society generally values egalitarianism instead of respecting the status quo derived from heritage: “Americans assume everyone is equal in status or at least ought to be given an equal opportunity to achieve status through hard work. Status is earned in the United States based upon what an individual does” (Weaver 13).

Despite the sense of egalitarianism, American society is rife with painful inequalities. While the United States as a whole is not exempt from this condition, the American South as portrayed in *True Blood* addresses these issues more thoroughly, using the vampire to discuss race and the legacy of slavery in the region. Arensberg and Niehoff note that in the United States “there are status differences based mainly on occupation, education and financial worth. [...] Although in theory all persons have equal opportunities, certain limitations exist, particularly those based on ethnic background and sex” (31).¹⁷ According to scholars, the cause of these

for cultural continuity, see Sacvan Bercovitch’s seminal works *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978).

17. In the United States equality is also questioned in terms of sex. Even if Arensberg and Niehoff refer their analysis to 1970s America their contribution is useful to understand the inequality of the sexes which in those years inflamed the rage of feminist movements across the country. At that time, when women were “discriminated against in certain professions” (40), gender inequality in terms of access to high-paid jobs was certainly more common than in the contemporary United States.

social and economic inequalities lies in one of the mechanisms behind the very constitution of national identity. Indeed, in order to have equal rights and fair representation before the law, it is necessary to be considered legally and culturally “American,” conforming to the shared values of mainstream society (40). In other words, people need to trade social equality for their own cultural roots, which results in the disappearance or limitation of cultural diversity.

On top of issues concerning cultural assimilation, I will also focus on the economic consequences of egalitarianism in American culture.¹⁸ On the political and economic scene, the sense of egalitarianism induced a wide support for political liberalism, while federalism led to a national structure that promoted independence at local level. This trend left local authorities wide powers on matters of governance and encouraged free trade and entrepreneurial activities through laissez faire capitalism. This process laid the foundations for contemporary capitalism, to which historically the United States owes much of its economic expansion and growth. As Weaver remarks, “it was no accident that the bible of capitalism, Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, was published in 1776 when the U.S. was founded” (13).

Capitalism, based on the accumulation of materialistic possessions, slowly turned the achievement-oriented attitude of American society into a system where success and status are “measured primarily by the quantity of material good one possesses, [...] because they indicate how much money an individual earns” (Arensberg and Niehoff 32). From the American perspective, possessing status goods is considered right and appropriate to reinforce one’s social position, and this is what American culture expects individuals to pursue. Nonetheless, the issue of capitalism and its social consequences in the American South is associated irremediably with the disastrous outcome of the Civil War and, hence, negatively portrayed in *True Blood*.

As a last point, my work will also focus on how *True Blood* address American society’s positive attitude towards progress, the future, and change. From a certain point of view, the push towards progress is one of the most relevant features of the American psyche, especially if it is oriented toward achieving material success. Indeed, in American society the “serious effort to achieve success is both a personal goal and an ethical imperative” (36). In a culture where constant improvement is the key to social acceptance, the tendency to perceive the future in a positive way is one of the consequences of a more or less marked optimism about social change. From this, it is clear that while American blind optimism can be a powerful force for social change it may also have a negative impact on their cultural system. The impossibility of

18. As a side note, egalitarianism also influences the relation between religion and State. The sense of egalitarianism, or lack thereof, influences not only interpersonal relations but also the moral, political and economic development of the country. For example, in terms of religion egalitarianism converts into a resistance to officially embrace a faith, unlike other countries. Indeed, even though Calvinist beliefs still enormously affect American everyday life, Calvinist religion has not been embraced as the official cult of the U.S., nor any other faith, because “the spirit of the country is secular and rationalistic” (Arensberg and Niehoff 32). This is an extremely interesting and, at the same time, possibly contradictory due to the prominence of shared Protestant-related dogmas among the population. In other words, while the values of the social subtext are blatantly Calvinist, the United States is characterized by a discrete religious pluralism where faith becomes essentially a private matter. As Weaver recollects, “the Constitution forbids the government from supporting any religion or interfering with any religious practices” (11). On the reverse, this attitude means that individuals have the power to choose their own religious affiliation as long as it does not interfere with matters of state and public affairs.

matching cultural expectations with the surrounding reality “calls all those in high position as successes and those in low ones as ‘failures’ even though everyone knows the majority must be in lower positions” (36). This aspect will be taken into account when analyzing the cultural dynamics of the American South and the role of the vampires Bill Compton and Eric Northman in embodying the capitalist quasi-obsession for material success.

1.7 Theoretical Background to the Project: Capitalism and Whiteness

The theoretical background which will constitute the core of my analysis of *True Blood* is related to the topics of race, with particular attention to the definition of whiteness and the vampire-capitalist. Hence, the following section will explore the main ideas recurring in my study in order to provide the necessary subtext to support the socio-cultural analysis of the media text approached in this project. In this summary I will approach the theme of race and capitalism at a general level, but in the chapter to follow I will provide specific supportive analysis of the *True Blood* adaptation and discuss the features of the vampires’ portrayal according to a regional perspective.

If we approach the general notion of whiteness as it is represented in the U.S. media, it is possible to understand how *True Blood* represents this topic. Indeed, American cinema has widely represented whiteness and “narrative forms of Eurocentrism” (Bernardi xv) as dominant categories which are fundamentally unquestionable and “by which all ‘Others’ fail by comparison” (xv). In other words, whiteness is approached in movies as a racial code itself operating both explicitly and implicitly, “fractur[ing] the representation of other colors” (xv). In *The Persistence of Whiteness*, a valuable text about race and racism in the media, Daniel Bernardi refers to sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant to describe how white supremacy is an extremely intrusive category in American cinema. He states that in the dynamics of racial discourse, whiteness is usually the dominant category which is “socially meaningful and politically consequential” (xvi). Thus, the notion of whiteness is similar to the definition of race itself, which has not been given to humanity *a priori* but it is the result of cultures and times.

Because race mirrors social structures and the current cultural discourse, whiteness and representations of cultural diversity adapt themselves, “inform[ing] us how we see ourselves, how we see others, how others see us and how we represent each other” (xvi). This means that race is in general a fluid category based on personal assumptions which change as time passes while fundamentally providing prejudiced representations of both dominant and subordinated categories. American cinema is an *exemplum* of this trend, as it is often centered more or less explicitly on notions of whiteness and race and provide portrayals of both, mirroring their times and mores.

However, these representations are often misleading and offer a narrowed, typified view of both categories. To clarify this concept, Bernardi metaphorically compares Hollywood to a prism which refracts notions of race, “misrepresenting whatever is seen through it, [...] attempt[ing] to segregate whiteness from color in ways that make the former invisible and the latter isolated and stereotypical” (xv). In other words, while whiteness is the normal, transparent subtext of American cinema, cultural diversity is addressed through exaggerated stereotypical

representations only with the purpose of enhancing the normative value of whiteness. This seems implicitly to address a mutual exclusion. As Bernardi states:

A film need not represent Europeans and European Americans as “white” to be about whiteness; it needs not be about, for example, “white trash” or “white money” to be about whiteness. Films about people of color are also about whiteness in so far as they are directed and contextualized by the ubiquity, however unquestioned or under-analyzed, of the US racial formation. (xvi)

Nonetheless, the peculiarity of U.S. media representing whiteness as a silent background category has paradoxically also the consequence of fostering a critique of the way cultural, sexual and social diversity is approached by American mainstream society at large without major regional differences, I may add. As Dale Hudson claims:

commercial genre films [...] often expose the unconscious workings of racism, chauvinism, sexism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, religious (Christian) fundamentalism, and other forms of oppression based on social difference in the USA. (128-129)

These concepts as explored here will frame my approach to race in *True Blood*, even though the analysis will intersect with the topic of capitalism associated with the vampire. The connection between vampirism and capital is a well-known theory spread through Marx’s works and, in particular, *Capital*.¹⁹ According to Franco Moretti, whose “The Dialectic of Fear” inaugurated criticism on the topic, one of the central concepts behind Marx’s use of the vampire is the parallelism connecting this creature of the night with capitalistic accumulation. Like a capitalist seeking to increase his wealth, the vampire’s thirst for blood is never-ending; he accumulates every drop without sharing with others in order to become stronger. As Moretti postulates, the vampire’s “ultimate aim is not to destroy the lives of others according to whim, to waste them, but to *use* them” (70-71).

This is tied to the very nature of the vampire. According to Marxist theories, because capitalists exploit the working class, they literally drain its vital forces, which is very similar to vampires’ blood-sucking. Hence, these creatures’ activities resemble the capitalistic gathering of more and more money for their own sake without re-investing it in the economic cycle. Moretti compares Dracula, the vampire-capitalist, to the apotheosis of “the bourgeois century and its negation” (72) in England. Indeed, the vampire-capitalist goes against any form of liberalism

19. The metaphor connecting vampirism and capitalism is an important concept constituting a subtle subtext of Marx’s philosophical production. For example, this notion appears three times in *Capital*, Marx’s most important work, where he specifically compares the vampire to a Gothic parasite living on the working class’s labour: “‘Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’ (Marx) also comments that the prolongation of the working day into the night ‘only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour’; thus the vampire will not let go ‘while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited’” (Neocleous 669). However, according to Neocleous, the figure of the vampire is also the subtext to others of Marx’s works which makes this more than a mere literary reference. The scholar traced mentions to the vampire in *The Class Struggles in France*, *The Civil War in France*, *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Holy Family* (670 – 617). Marx always uses this metaphor with the implication that vampirism is identified with those privileged classes which suck life from the weakest ones in the social structure.

and independence pursued economically and politically by the British middle class, thus turning into a cold monopolist. However, according to Marc Neocleous, the real focus of Marx's reference to the vampire is actually the role of the dead in the dynamics of political economy. Because capital is nothing less than accumulation of workers' labour, it can be defined as "dead labour" itself (680). Its growth is dependent on the workers' living labour, which influences "accumulated labour as a means for maintaining and multiplying the exchange value of the (capital)" (680).

Expanding Moretti's criticism further, Neocleous states that the emphasis of Marx's vampire metaphor is on the workers' alienation in the capitalistic system, which leads slowly to their death both as individuals and as a class. With the increased exploitation of the labour force through the extension of the working hours, workers' lives are consumed to the point of death. Thus, the vampire-capitalist is identified as the agent carrier of that death, since his necrophiliac prosperity is literally based on the workers' dead bodies. In this way, the capitalistic system is governed by the "rule of the dead" (684) because it flourishes the most when the "capital damages (human beings) as sensuous creatures" (682) draining their energies and passions.

However, the Marxist interpretation of the vampire is not the only notion I will address in this work. It is also important to point out that because of its tendency to wealth accumulation, capitalism in its more contemporary expression is also strictly related to the ability to purchase specific objects, which turns into consumerist habits defining the belonging of a specific social status. Discussing contemporary capitalism in the U.S., Sharon O'Dair emphasizes that the association of consumerism and the ability to spend money on certain kind of products marks social differences and defines the cultural standards people tend to pursue:

Inequality is not only a matter of class defined in terms of one's relationship to production but also a matter of status, of prestige, defined largely in terms of one's relationship to consumption, that is, in terms of one's lifestyle or culture. [...] Status is not achieved solely by acquiring, say, scarce objects and is, therefore, neither merely a reflection nor a superstructural effect of class; nevertheless, status acquisition is linked closely to material conditions of life. (338)

Thinking of contemporary U.S. society, O'Dair refers to historian James Livingston's repudiation of capital as the great evil of economic systems. According to Livingston, capitalism is now integrated in these systems where how we consume is not only tied to the products available and the class we belong to, but it is also dependant on cultural and social factors. For this reason, class should be considered less relevant in the analysis of capitalist systems and, in order to understand how contemporary capitalism work, we should "give way 'to alternative principles of social organization such as race and gender.'"(O'Dair 338-339)

2. TRUE BLOOD AND CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN VAMPIRES

2.1 The Southern Vampires' Response to Issues of Race and Economic Disparities

When you came in the air went out.
And every shadow filled up with doubt.
I don't know who you think you are,
But before the night is through,
I wanna do bad things with you.

Jace Everett – *Bad Things*
(*True Blood* Opening Credits)

This chapter will analyze the portrayal of vampire Otherness in the first four seasons of *True Blood* (2008–2011)¹, the HBO TV series adapted from Charlaine Harris' *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels. *True Blood* has become a real milestone in contemporary Southern media because of its power to embody many of the traditional cultural anxieties of the American South. Through the use of Southern stereotypes, the show offers different regional perspectives on the themes of American capitalism and issues of race than those prevalent in the United States. It also explores how these two aspects relate to defining moments of Southern history, the Civil War in particular. *True Blood* questions whether the contemporary South is able to relate effectively to subjects who embody issues generated by capitalism and representations of race and, thus, are considered as social outcasts from a regional perspective.

In this chapter I will discuss the cultural value of *True Blood* as an attempt to criticize Southern conservatism and rejection of Otherness through the use of horror tropes. Taking into account the events of the Civil War, my analysis will address how the *True Blood* vampires are able to reveal the social anxieties derived from the regional past and how, to do so, they offer their own contemporary portrayal of Otherness. Analyzing the use of the vampire trope in the show, I will focus on how the American South uses issues of capitalism and race to heal finally from its past. However, my work will point out how it is controversial whether *True Blood* is able to exorcise the anxieties derived from the Civil War and to pave successfully the way for a

1. *True Blood* is not the first TV series showing a love triangle between a human and two vampires. The HBO series displays a few similarities with Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). The setting is specifically "American" in both series, but while *True Blood* is typically Southern, *Buffy*'s background is Californian. Also, Sookie and Buffy, the female protagonists, are two very independent girls with special powers; while Sookie is telepathic, Buffy has the Slayers' super-human strength. However, while Buffy uses her ability to kill vampires, Sookie more than once uses them to assist the vampires Bill and Eric. Both shows deal with the supernatural: witches, werewolves and ghosts are common in both the productions, even though in *Buffy* they usually are a hidden evil force to fight, whereas in *True Blood* supernatural creatures live in the open with humans. Other resemblances include the portrayal of the domesticated vampires. In both series it seems that love is central to the humanization of the undead and Angel-Bill and Eric-Spike share similar physical features and personalities as the good and not-so-good-but-not-so-evil vampires.

new representation of the contemporary South.

Also, on top of its cultural value, *True Blood* deserves further critical attention because of its particular application of the (TV) vampire genre to the portrayal of Southern capitalism and race. Since vampires are also often associated with immortality, the cultural tropes which they represent implicitly convey the message that these aspects are permanent and persist over time, like the vampires themselves. By association, this indicates that the social anxieties exposed in *True Blood* are not simply the product of the time but have pre-existing roots within Southern cultural heritage which needs further analysis to understand the American South today. The show is particularly apt at using the modern vampire “[to] lur[e] the audience into feeling sympathy for [him] before muddying the water with moral ambiguities” (Abbott 36), which causes the representation of Southern cultural issues to be controversial. Hence, the importance of *True Blood* as a new chapter in the Southern vampire narrative justifies its inclusion in this work.

In 2014 *True Blood* aired its seventh and last season. However, because the narrative structure and character development from season five onwards tend to diverge consistently from the novels, I will only consider the earlier seasons showing a closer narrative proximity with the texts. Although the TV show will be the main source of reference in this chapter, using references to the novels will help the comparison and integration between different media. This will assist in including those parts of Harris’ texts which are relevant for the analysis and which contain pieces of information concerning the Southern context not available through the show.

Focusing on the American Civil War in my discussion of *True Blood* allows me to reframe the discourses of race and capitalism in a specifically Southern context. The peculiarity of the *True Blood* vampires is to represent a projection of the haunting Others behind the traumatic defeat experienced by the American South as a result of the War. These Othered subjects are both the Union and the slaves, the main protagonists involved in the War with the American South. Because the war is one of the defining moments of regional history, these two groupings have strongly entered collective Southern imagery as the subjects responsible for the missed Southern dream of independence. Their historical heritage is not a pale memory from the past but rather a reality which economically and socially influences the region in the present day, shaping social patterns and defining cultural interactions.

Even today, the South seems to indicate a strong sense of distrust of and prejudice against the “Northerners,” the (white) “Yankees.” The roots of the hatred against this cultural group are in the role of the Union as initiator of the War and in its responsibility for creating a concurrence between economic interests and abolitionism, along with weakening Southern economic and political influence in the United States. At that time, the South was prospering through the cotton trade based on the plantation system, while the North wanted to impose a new capitalist model which left little power in the hands of the rich Southern slaveholders. Therefore, at the War’s end, the “Yankees” were considered responsible for the end of Southern freedom and prosperity, and the Southern reaction was harsh, since the new economic model was adopted in the region as

a consequence of the defeat and not because of an independent economic development.²

Because abolitionism was central to the War, the other ghost still haunting Southern culture today is clearly the institution of slavery or, rather, its heritage, symbolizing a very painful past of racial hatred, violence and the endless fight for human rights. As Ayers concludes: “Black Southerners would struggle, largely on their own, for the next one hundred years” (57). The reasons the American South considered slaves Others seem clear, since the relations of power involved between the descendants of Europeans and the populations enslaved are justified through the white supremacy within colonial discourse. The ex-slaves became, then, an issue at the moment they started to fight for their emancipation and equality throughout the twentieth century, thus becoming a threatening Other to the political and social stability of the South.³

First, in the chapter I will briefly explore Neal Jordan’s 1994 adaptation of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) in order to set the stage for a discussion of *True Blood*.⁴ This media text will be discussed in the form of side references intended to support the analysis of Othered characters in the show, as well as the cultural issues addressed. As a movie dealing with both the horror of contamination from Otherness and the yearning for it, *Interview with the Vampire* tells us a lot about the American South through the myth of the undead. As Stephen Arata theorizes about the figure of Dracula, the vampire biting is an archetypical act of counter-colonization in itself: “Horror arises not because Dracula destroys bodies, but because he appropriates and transforms them. Having yielded to his assault, one literally ‘goes native’ by becoming a vampire oneself” (630). The fear of being contaminated by other beings through vampirizing acts is a central theme of many vampire narratives, and these two are no exception.

Because this trope comes back again in *True Blood*, which shares with *Interview with the Vampire* much of the same cultural subtext, I will draw connections with Louis and Lestat when necessary to show how this TV series offers a contemporary version of Southern issues.

2. As historian Edward L. Ayers points out: “The South adapted its economy after the war as well. By the 1880s, the South rates of urban growth, manufacturing, and population movement kept pace with the North, a remarkable shift for only twenty years after losing slavery and the Civil War. But black Southerners were excluded from much of the new prosperity” (57).

3. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s promoted social and political equality for African-Americans. Malcolm X is remembered as one of its most important representatives, who opted for a non-violent approach to reach equality. This movement influenced the South to overcome racial segregation. However, between 1966 and 1982 the Black Panther Party adopted more violent, revolutionary methods especially to control the police’s questionable involvement in dealing with African-Americans. This created a situation of crisis in the Southern States and political unbalance which characterized those years.

4. A short summary of the movie is as follows: the protagonist of the story is Louis de Pointe du Lac, a landowner in 1791 Louisiana whose life is completely destroyed after his family’s death. At the beginning of the movie, he shares his story with a journalist in San Francisco in 1991, which gives the movie its title. Louis’ existence dramatically changes when Lestat turns him into a vampire. However, he is unable to feed on humans without remorse. His despair reaches the climax when he kills Claudia, a little sick orphan, who is turned into a vampire by Lestat. After trying to kill Lestat, Louis and Claudia reach Europe to find other vampires. But, when in Paris, these kill Claudia because the existence of a child-vampire is against the rules. Once back in New Orleans in the twentieth century, an upset Louis finds out that Lestat is alive but unable to keep up with modern life, and he abandons him once and for all. The movie closes with Lestat offering the journalist the choice of an immortal life as he did with Louis centuries before.

Interview with the Vampire will function as important touchstone in this work and will appear throughout the chapter. My aim is to demonstrate how the Southern issues analyzed are part of a larger cultural trend affecting the American South. It will allow me to validate my claim concerning the historical persistence of these aspects in the region using examples from media representation which are distant in time but which all use the vampire trope to explore cultural anxieties. Also, it will be useful to identify and describe shifts of perspective, if any, in the Southern cultural *milieu* with respect to a more recent media text such as *True Blood*.

Last but not least, the inclusion of *Interview with the Vampire* is necessary because this movie has been critically acclaimed as *the* Southern vampire narrative. The importance of this film for both the modern changes to the vampire genre and for the significance of the Southern setting is unquestionable. As already mentioned in this work, it marks the passage from the classic Nosferatu to the contemporary American vampire. Also, it carries particular value for the American South by using its Gothic tones to expose the social anxieties experienced both during the 1970s, when the novel was written, as well as during the 1990s, when the movie was produced. Indeed, *Interview with the Vampire* symbolizes the encounter and melting together of different cultures, which has not always had a peaceful outcome. Set in colonial Louisiana before the cession to the United States, the movie shows the deep historical roots of Southern rejection of Otherness and the troublesome dealing with cultural diversity.

The vampires Lestat de Lioncourt, an aristocrat, and Louis de Pointe Du Lac, a plantation owner, both of French descent, are the quintessential metaphor for the horror of white colonization.⁵ I will discuss how *Interview with the Vampire* tends to identify Louis and Lestat with the white slaveholders who embody power. Conversely, *True Blood* tries to portray, more or less successfully, a vampire who represents African-American minorities once oppressed by slavery and has now become a symbol of their social empowerment. However, I will point out how this evolution in the portrayal of the vampire is not rendered as fully positive because it indicates the disruption of the political status quo in the American South, which generates a sense of anxiety around regional changes.

The enactment of Louis and Lestat's monstrosity through vampirization is possible because the very setting of New Orleans allows it. Louisiana itself is similar to the vampire's liminal nature; it is a metaphorical crossroad where contrasting social and cultural forces merge and where normative boundaries are blurred. Louisiana's past is the result of a consistent cultural hybridization based on influences from French, Spanish and British colonizers; Aboriginal peoples, African American slaves and free Caribbean people – and Caribbean slaves too; Creoles, descendants of Europeans and African Americans, and Cajuns (French-Canadians deported to the area at the end of the eighteenth century); and, finally, the immigration flows from other European countries over the course of the twentieth century. In this multicultural setting, which is the result of colonizing processes but at the same time a non-place with an

5. The criticism about *Interview with the Vampire* is particularly focused on themes such as disturbing blood relations established through vampiric reproduction (Chung; Benefiel), modern vampires and their questionable ethos (Rout), queerness and deconstruction of gender (Gelder 112-113; Paolucci), orality and community (Wasson), Gothic genre in both the movie and the novel, as well as the type of vampire narrative (Gelder 113-121; Powell); Southern Gothic in particular through historical contextualization (Hudders).

undefined culture, Louis and Lestat can freely operate their vampirism.

In my analysis I will refer to the shift occurring between Louis and *True Blood* in terms of the social location of the vampire and in terms of race. In Jordan's movie Louis and Lestat are presented as aristocrats of European descent who prosper as a result of Southern colonization and enjoy their privileges only because they exploit the plantation system. They do not work for their own success, which is rather a consequence of owning property – slaves and land. Conversely, the *True Blood* vampires identify themselves with capitalism and with the model of the vampire-business man, who works his way to wealth through his efforts. In addition, *Interview with the Vampire* presents the vampires as oppressors of enslaved populations who keep prospering on the perpetration of racism, whereas *True Blood* turns these vampires into sympathetic minorities who experience racism and subordination.

Hence, these two media texts will be used to explore the shift from the pre-Civil War Southern economy to post-war development, as well as how African-Americans' passage from slavery to freedom has changed the Southern social context. The presence of these themes in *Interview with the Vampire* and *True Blood* shows how cultural productions in various cinematic and televisual media have responded to the Deep South's contradictory inner forces. On the one hand, the South would be open to more progressive views but, on the other hand, it tends to conservative positions on matters of economics and social integration. Against this historical background, my analysis will prove how *True Blood* has now become *the* contemporary Southern vampire media text representative of regional socio-cultural uncertainties, which are characterized by a highly provocative portrayal. Hence, I will discuss how Alan Ball's show offers a moment of serious revision and questioning of the state of things in the American South, also considering the U.S. at large. With the Obama presidency this pattern of social insecurity seems to have gained further strength, especially as Southern states are imposing "regressive" social policies such as banning increases on minimum wages and sick days, and voting rights limitations for minorities, as historian Nelson Lichtenstein notes:

This is not just a product of racial fears and resentments. Instead it appears to reflect an increasingly inbred Southern hostility to the exercise of economic regulatory power on virtually any level. As in the 19th century, many in the South, including a considerable proportion of the white working-class, have been persuaded that the federal government is their enemy. (Par. 14)

While Jordan's movie refers to an American South in economic expansion and with relative political autonomy, *True Blood* vampires are particularly representative of the social anxiety around the change of this situation in the present age.

As part of the so-called "popular culture", *True Blood* and *Interview with the Vampire* show how contrasting cultural forces surround the "average Southerner" to whom these media texts are targeted and offer highly-controversial vampire portrayals. *True Blood*, in particular, uses traumatic psychological experiences surrounding sexuality as a way not only to explore the characters' development but also to identify metaphorically social and cultural issues typical of the South. The show uses the topic of Freudian uncanny experiences surrounding individuals' sexuality to create a parallel with the similar discomfort and anxiety provoked by racial and

economic interests in the South, which manifest themselves through various Othered figures in the show. Alan Ball, producer and creator of the show, claims that the “horror of intimacy” (*True Blood* special, min. 13:14) is one of the core themes in *True Blood*, which he explains as the individual’s anxiety over getting romantically close to other human beings.

While Ball specifically refers to the effects of sexual intimacy on the human psyche, I would like to draw attention here to the use of the fear of intercourse with vampires as a projection of more complex cultural anxieties which influence the individual at a social level. In my analysis I will emphasize how the purpose of the show is to convey that the terror evoked by the Other may be expressed in different forms, and romance is only one of the ways *True Blood* does so. After providing a brief account of this widely discussed theme, I will describe how the “horror of intimacy” can actually be framed within a social and cultural context using discourses of class and race, which are currently understudied topics. Framing “the horror of intimacy” as a consequence of Freudian anxieties, I will explore how this fear goes beyond the mere human psychological dimension and becomes a universal experience which recurs with the same patterns in different historical and social contexts.

I argue that the “horror of intimacy” is a metaphorical narrative device to describe the historical tensions between the North and South of the United States. This trope is symbolic of the horrors experienced during the Civil War. By extension, this controversial regional relationship goes as far as to embody racialized and even “queered” tones, whose portrayal in the show is focused on the negative representation of the vampire-capitalist and the troublesome portrayal of the vampire as representative of cultural minorities. This chapter will specifically address how these two images, strongly present in *True Blood*, bring to the surface the most problematic aspects of the regional past and suggest the social anxieties of the American South today.

First, my analysis will focus on the negative portrayal of the vampire-capitalist and its connection with the stereotype of the Northerner according to a Southern perspective. I will emphasize that the *True Blood* Southern vampires fail miserably at social integration, even if they try to follow mainstream behaviours, such as running businesses, living a middle-class life and seeking political recognition. This will allow me to explore how the figure of the vampire-capitalist becomes problematic when filtered through *True Blood*’s Southern perspective. Because the vampires in the show adopt mainstreaming and bourgeois life as a way to reach social acceptance, they are negatively represented as a force trying to impose itself on the Southern United States. This seems to create a strong parallel with the relations between the North and the South during the Civil War, which concluded with the Union bending the Confederation to its will, political influence and even way of thinking.

Against this background, this chapter will focus on the analysis of Eric Northman and Bill Compton, the most important vampire characters in the series. Because these characters offer thorny complexity and multiple contradictions, I will try to isolate the aspects they embody from those of the Yankee and African-American groups, while not claiming to provide an absolute and definitive interpretation of these features. In the first section, I will explore how both Eric and Bill attempt to blend in through different approaches to using “Yankee” profiles. I will analyze

how they respond to the model of the Southern vampire-capitalist in the show and will emphasize how their negative representation is a direct consequence of regional historical occurrences. Eric follows the vampire-capitalist model, and he wants to achieve social success and power using any means necessary. Considering this, he seems to be very closer to the traditional Marxist interpretation of the vampire, as he works hard to achieve his goals, he owns his own business, and he is particularly concerned with money-making and status in the human and in the vampire world.

In Bill's case, this character retains Yankee references in the way he tries to live in the mainstream in coexistence with humans. Although born a Southerner himself, Bill embodies the painful memories of the Civil War not as a local hero but by becoming paradoxically its opposite. He seems to seek a life like a "normal" American and focuses more on settling down to a Yankee, middle-class existence and presenting himself as a non-threatening individual to be accepted in the small community of Bon Temps. In fact, his pretending to be human does not suppress his real nature as a vampire and does not induce the people of Bon Temps to opt for a welcoming acceptance, in part because his bourgeois background clashes with the rural mores and customs of this little Louisiana city.⁶ While capitalism and middle-class lifestyle are regarded in other areas of the United States as promoters of economic prosperity, economic differences in the South are seen as barriers which mark a precise social line not likely to be overcome.

The second focus of this chapter will be an analysis of the connection between the legacy of slavery and the *True Blood* vampires. This section will emphasize the parallelism between ex-slaves and the undead in the show, pointing out how similar they are in experiencing discrimination through racist patterns which African-Americans have historically endured. My analysis will emphasize that the portrayal of the vampires as a threatening group in the show is a consequence of Southern anxiety over the social emancipation of minorities in the region. Indeed, because vampires want to achieve equality and coexistence with humans, they are ostracized and subject to several acts of violence because of their potentially subversive role in disrupting white supremacy in the region and the U.S at large.

Hence, I will highlight the analogies between Southern opposition to African-American emancipation and the *True Blood* vampires, addressing in particular the social dynamics in which they are involved with humans. Instead of focusing the analysis on specific characters exclusively, I will refer to discrimination against the vampires through several examples which indicate their exclusion as a group rather than specifically involving single subjects. I will first address the vampires' skin as a marker of social exclusion typical of racist discourses, and I will highlight how biological difference in the show is used to justify the vampires' exclusion as

6. Charlaine Harris invented the little fictional town of Bon Temps as a setting for Sookie's adventures. In the show this city is located in the Northern part of Louisiana, between Alexandria and Shreveport. The name of the town is probably a reference to the settlement of Cajun immigrants of French-Canadian descent, although it is common knowledge that the majority of French Creoles are now located in the Southern part of Louisiana. According to Kevin J. Corn and George A. Dunn, the name of the city may be a direct reference to the phrase "*Laissez les bons temps rouler!*" – "Let the good times roll!" (145), which people typically cry out on Mardi Gras, the carnival traditionally held yearly in New Orleans.

Others. In addition, I will point out the analogies between the shared values of the vampire “feudal” system and the institution of slavery. Slavery was also responsible for creating a hybridized African-American culture, a process the *True Blood* vampires share on a certain level. Finally, in the last part of this section, I will also address how social hatred turns into violence in the American South and will describe how the preaching of the Fellowship of the Sun, a fictional Christian movement, offers a religious justification for discrimination against vampires.

These vampires are unique because they are able to embody these two opposite Others, creating a contradictory metaphor which is worth further exploration. The *True Blood* vampire is simultaneously associated with two different groups which socially, culturally and even ethnically oppose each other. In other words, the show uses the vampire as a projection of simultaneous multiple groupings, often even blurred into single characters. This Southern vampire’s Otherness goes beyond black and white, with discourses of race or economic disparities becoming a sort of “melting pot” where an Othered label is equally attributed to whomever is considered different, no matter how he or she tries to assimilate to mainstream society.

2.2 *True Blood*: A Synopsis

True Blood (2008–2014) is a HBO TV series, produced by Alan Ball, creator of *Six Feet Under*, and takes inspiration from Charlaine Harris’ *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. These novels merge vampires, romance and supernatural elements with features from thrillers and detective stories. The protagonist is Sookie Stackhouse, a telepathic barmaid who lives in the fictional city of Bon Temps, Louisiana. The novels explore her adventures in a supernatural world inhabited by werewolves, fairies and vampires, who have revealed their existence to humans. In Harris’ fictional world, vampires can live in the mainstream because of Tru Blood, a Japanese synthetic food which allows them to survive without drinking human blood. Through his TV adaptation, Ball exploited the horror-fantasy setting of Harris’ books as a medium to explore the darkest places of the human soul creating “a polysemous narrative about the minutiae and stresses of everyday life, including many overt references to issues surrounding sexuality, grief, depression, madness and death” (Cherry 8).

Being a Southerner himself, Ball drew upon his own background and perspective on these themes, reviving what Chris Ayres calls “a nostalgia for what he calls the ‘gothic sensibility of the South’” (qtd. in Cherry 9). The result is a TV series which has become “an unpredictable thing” (6), reaching cult status over the years and appreciated by a dedicated fandom. Also, the advantages of turning the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* into a TV series gave Ball the opportunity to give relevance to characters who in the novels have no significant space. Lafayette Reynolds, the gay cook at the Merlotte’s bar, is probably one of the most relevant examples and has grown to be one of the most loved characters in the show, whereas in the novels he dies at the end of the first book. Also, the episodic nature of *True Blood* allowed Ball to expand significantly the narrative perspective and the fabula of the series, offering multiple personas’ voices at the same time, whereas the novels present Sookie’s point of view exclusively.

The first season, adapted from *Dead Until Dark* (2001), is mostly about the Great

Revelation and the blossoming of the romance between a human and a vampire. Sookie meets for the first time one of these creatures, Bill Compton, who became a non-dead during the Civil War and has now taken his old family's mansion back as a member of the Bon Temps community. The two become romantically involved, much to the other humans' disappointment. Indeed, vampires are not welcome there and are mainly seen as a threat to humans. The first season not only is useful to set the tone of vampire-human relationships, but it also allows the audience to understand the typology of modern vampires as portrayed through the difficulties encountered in mainstream life. Moreover, the season also questions if the full integration of minorities is effectively changing the American South.

However, Sookie's adventures are not over, as the city is taken over by Maryann Forrester in the second season, adapted from *Living Dead in Dallas* (2002), which is mostly about exploring humans' dark side. This season's plotline also expands the conflicts between vampires and humans, involving Sookie and Bill. Eric Northman, owner of the Fangtasia bar and vampire sheriff of Area 5 in Louisiana, one of the regions of influence in which the vampire authority has divided the U.S., asks them to investigate his maker's sudden disappearance. The organization responsible for the kidnapping is the Fellowship of the Sun, a Christian Church whose main purpose is to fight and kill what they perceive to be unnatural vampires. This second season is particularly useful to understand the basis for Eric's character development as a vampire-capitalist and the reasons behind his negative portrayal, as well as the contradictory feelings he shares with Sookie and Godric. Also, the theme of Southern racism is explored through the Fellowship of the Sun and its dreadful acts against the vampire, which offers insight into the reception of cultural diversity in the region.

Season three, adapted from *Club Dead* (2003), takes over from the end of the previous one and shows the vampires' power structure better. Bill's kidnapper is revealed to be Russell Edgington, vampire King of Mississippi. In the meanwhile, Bill discovers that Sookie is a descendant of the fairies, thus explaining her telepathic powers. Back in Bon Temps, Sookie revokes Bill's invitation from her home as she discovers that Bill was her boyfriend only because Queen Sophie-Anne, the vampire Queen of Louisiana, ordered him. Thus, the theme of heartbreak and "horror of intimacy" is explored further in this season. In season four, adapted from *Dead to the World* (2003) Eric, under the effect of a spell, loses his memory because of a coven of witches practising necromancy. Sookie hides Eric in her home until he recovers and she slowly falls in love with him. Back in her home, the girl confesses to Bill and Eric that she has feelings for both of them but that she cannot make a choice, so her final decision is to be alone. Seasons three and four provide a better understanding of the vampire hierarchy, while offering interesting more insights on how capitalism is taking over the American South through Eric's negative qualities.

2.3 The Civil War: Trauma, Sexuality and the Horror of the Other

In *True Blood* the disturbing vampire's Otherness as a reminder of how Southern history influences the way human characters interact with vampires. Sexuality is the parameter that controls such an interaction and is portrayed as highly controversial, questioning whether the vampires' connections with the American South's past may be fully addressed or not at the

present day. The extensive use of sexual tropes in *True Blood* has the function of portraying all Southern social anxieties at once, while conveying the sense that it is impossible to escape from them, since like Freudian repressed memories, they await in the Southern collective subconscious to be healed properly once the regional conscious mind is ready to do so. This suggests how the controversial representation of intimacy may be a symptom of a more subtle psychological discomfort which is the product of the Southern socio-cultural context and historical background. In the following section I will analyze these aspects taking into account the trope of “the horror of intimacy” in *True Blood* and the historical implications and critique behind its use of romance.

When analyzing the value of vampire movies, Isaac Tylim points out how these media texts “are paradoxical signifiers both of the destruction of life and its opposite, the permanence of life. Malevolent, persecutory objects, the vampires may also appear as innocent victims, perennial mourners of eternal life, sufferers without relief, or neurotics with fangs” (281). Although *True Blood* is not a movie but a TV series, its value as a contemporary media text embodying both the present and the past of the American South follows the idea of permanence and immortality within the vampire genre. *True Blood* strongly indicates the persistence of certain cultural models which repeat themselves in time, adapting to different contexts, and to do so, the series uses the theme of love to represent the recurrence of these anxieties.

As in the already mentioned *Twilight* saga, vampire romance is central in *True Blood*, and intimacy is often very graphically portrayed in the show as a vehicle to address regional cultural issues. However, its horrors pertain to a dimension which does not concern only sexuality *per se*. Sexual tropes in the show are indicative of a larger context because they hide complex dynamics of the rejection of Otherness, which may be fairly considered a Freudian reaction shared by Western cultures against the “unknown” and/or “threatening”.⁷ While my analysis will not be focused on these sexual tropes exclusively, it will refer to them as a starting point to discuss how feelings of rejection concerning the physical or psychological proximity to Othered subjects is a recurrent issue in the American South. I will describe how these aspects connect with the historical and socio-cultural background of the region and help reveal the traumas hidden underneath Southern collective subconscious.

Most of the critique about the theme of love in *True Blood* has followed the interpretation of the traditional vampire tropes, which associate sexuality with the more or less explicit negation of sexual “deviancy” and impulses. In this, it clearly follows most of the criticism produced about the figure of Dracula, which explores the vampire’s value as sexual Other in terms of incest, sadism and repressed homoerotic desires (Gelder 66-70), questioning the boundaries between humans and animals and addressing polymorphous male and female sexualities. While these issues were implicit in *Dracula*, *Interview with the Vampire*, one of the most recent examples of this trend, refreshes this theme through the relationship between Louis

7. It is necessary to specify here that when arguing for the recurrence of certain dynamics concerning sexual tropes, I am not stating that the forms and manifestations of these tropes are the same in all cultures and at all moments in history. Rather, I am affirming that the subconscious fears behind these manifestations are similar, if we take into account that Freudian psychology and its core idea that the model of the human psyche based on Id, Ego and Super-Ego is somewhat shared by Western cultures, as well as the defense mechanisms in response to traumatic situations.

and Lestat. Their ambiguous connection reveals undertones of domination and submission based on the blurring of gender and sexual roles: “The dominant patriarch/master vampire Lestat creates a passive daughter/wife in the twenty-five-year-old Louis [...] Though created before Claudia and an assistant at her creation, Louis is Claudia’s dark-haired double, passive and silent, more ‘feminine’ than ‘masculine’” (Chung 174). Although Dracula, Louis and Lestat are vampires far away in time and context, these references make clear how the vampire’s nature is, across time and geography, almost blatantly embedded with sexuality.

Therefore, *True Blood* offers its own interpretation of these issues, including the interesting approach to the vampires’ sexuality as a vehicle for self-discovery and self-awareness, in particular for Sookie’s character evolution. Indeed, criticism has mostly framed the romance genre in *True Blood* in relation to Sookie’s sexual and psychological development, “where the mingling does become a *melee* of love, it signifies action and not substance, [...] it inaugurates transformation, and is thus originary” (Rothermel 94). The second main line of interpretation takes back the male vampire as Byronic hero (Mukherjea; Bailie) and promotes the identification of the viewers, or readers, with Sookie, the heroine of the Gothic romance. The third line is exclusively focused on sexuality itself and issues of social appropriateness. It describes the ambiguity of Sookie’s values concerning her sexuality, which oscillates between her role as a modern independent woman and her image as a good Southern girl as she questions the validity of sex outside a respectable relationship (Craton and Jonell 115-117).

Unlike the teenage-marketed *Twilight* saga, where romance excludes explicit references to sexuality, most of the *True Blood* narrative follows Sookie’s romance with “the vampire Bill Compton (or perhaps more specifically, Sookie’s selection of libidinal and liminal potential lovers, the vampires Bill and Eric, the werewolf Alcide and the shapeshifter Sam)” (Cherry 13).⁸ According to Brigid Cherry, Sookie resembles Bella as a typical “paranormal romance heroine” (14) looking for a relationship with a supernatural creature who is physically and psychologically superior to her in order to compensate for her own weaknesses. Because Sookie has telepathic powers, or as she calls it, her “disability,” she is an outcast in Bon Temps. Due to her mind-reading ability, people believe that “she’s crazy as a bedbug” and even label her as “retarded” (“Strange Love,” 1.1).

These remarks, however, are not directly addressed to her but are always conveyed through voice-overs indicating the characters’ thoughts as perceived by Sookie. The use of this sound device enhances the idea that the girl is an outcast because people do not directly talk to her and treat her with condescension, but nonetheless judge her harshly. Thus, Sookie lives at the margins of the community, and the relationship with Bill represents her chance to feel like a

8. The absence of sexuality in *Twilight* has been object of academic interest because the vampire trope is usually deeply connected to this theme. Although the relationship between Edward and Bella is characterized by sexual tension, sexuality is never acted upon until after marriage. This theme may also show a connection with the American Northwestern puritan mold, although critics have widely interpreted the absence of vampires’ sexuality primarily as a consequence of Stephenie Meyer’s Mormon background, which encourages pre-marital chastity and marriage as the only place where sexuality can be expressed. Hence, this approach seems to frame *Twilight*’s absent sexuality within the realm of moral issues, whereas *True Blood* uses the overexposure of sexuality as a medium for social and cultural criticism. For further information about this topic in *Twilight* see Taylor, Merskin, Kokkola.

normal girl. Despite Sookie's similarity with the *Twilight* protagonist, Cherry questions Bella's passivity versus Sookie's activity. In particular, she makes the point that Sookie is more critical of the vampires' ways in general and tries to assert her own independence from her lovers rather than to accept blindly their behaviours.

To expand further the line of criticism supporting Sookie's proactivity in questioning the vampires' deeds, I would argue that her disenchanted approach to the vampire world has a strong influence on her overall self-discovery. Unlike Bella, who finds her real identity disappearing behind her spousal role as "Mrs. Edward Cullen," Sookie has a different approach to her romantic experiences. Romance for Sookie is a moment for growing as an individual and results in a learning experience which changes both herself and the way she relates to others and to the world. Falling in love with "Vampire Bill" has made her stronger and able to face the grief of her grandmother's murder, and even the mysterious Bon Temps killer's threats. The scene where she clearly states her attachment to Bill is particularly significant.

The two characters are framed by a medium shot as they embrace in bed, close to each other. The room is completely in the dark, but the dominating colors are in shades of blue to suggest Sookie's inner coldness and discomfort for her grandmother's death. The camera slowly moves forward with a top-down movement on the characters, who are represented as stationary objects. In motion picture terminology, this tracking shot called "dolly shot" has usually the purpose to indicate emphasis on objects or characters. In this case it emphasizes the psychological closeness between Sookie and Bill. Although the shot in a way to convey the couple's intimacy, a sudden cut changes the perspective. A shot from the left of Sookie's profile follows, while she turns her back to Bill. This cut to a different shot where Sookie is framed alone is a clear suggestion that she is still independent from Bill despite the strong bond between the two. A few shots later, as she turns her back to establish eye contact and a psychological connection with Bill, she tells the vampire: "All the trouble I'm in, it's mine; I chose it when I chose you," in order to point out that she does not need his protection from the serial killer ("Plaisir d'Amour", 1.9). This means that loving another individual is a choice, and Sookie is ready to face the responsibilities and consequences of this, even though it will lead her to danger. As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, the "horror of intimacy" is a prominent leitmotif of the show.

This concept highlights human repulsion in the face of closeness with other individuals and the fear of losing one's identity which such proximity may cause. One scene in particular conveys this idea; it is set in the Stackhouse kitchen, in plain daylight. Sookie and Adele, her grandmother, sit at the table for breakfast. As Sookie expresses her doubts concerning her relationship with Bill, the scene alternates between close-ups of the girl and of Adele. While Sookie's shots are frontal, Adele is more distant from the camera because her shots deploy the technique of placing the camera behind Sookie, whose back appears on the screen. This quick separation of different type of shots in film and TV editing usually indicates that the characters' point of view diverge or are different. Indeed, the scene is well summarized in Adele's words to Sookie, which try to lead her down a different path: "It's scary to open your heart to somebody" ("Mine", 1.3).

Psychoanalysis seems to play a major role in explaining the value of the “horror of intimacy” in *True Blood*. The unsettling yet extensive portrayal of intimacy in the show reveals that Freudian repression is a concept particularly relevant for the analysis of this trope. Freudian theories emphasize the complexity of the human mind and its mechanisms adopted to deal with uncomfortable situations, which range from traumas to unpleasant thoughts, memories and wishes. According to Freudian theories, repression is a defense mechanism adopted by the human psyche when a painful experience is excluded from the conscious mind and buried down into the subconscious: “Repression, a key concept of psychoanalysis [...] pre-exists the ego e.g. ‘Primal Repression’. It ensures that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind, and would, if recalled, arouse anxiety, is prevented from entering into it” (Gregory 681).

Repression acts through the manifestation of anxiety; acting on specific desires generates an anxious state of mind which induces the psyche to push this desire into the subconscious. However, the painful experience does not disappear. It is simply kept at bay by the libido (life energy), which is completely channelled into this repression mechanism and is released only once the repressed memory comes back to the surface again into the conscious mind. Clearly, sexuality has a lot to do with repression, since it is *Eros*, comprised of irrational impulses and desires driving human behavior towards procreation. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud claims that human beings struggle between the creative power of *Eros* and its counterpart, *Thanatos*, the “death-wish” manifested through the natural compulsion to destruction which is constitutive of all living organisms.

On top of repression mechanisms, the double face of sexuality may have also the consequence of causing uncanny feelings in the psyche. The concept of the uncanny, from the German word *Das Unheimliche*, “the opposite of what is familiar,” is another notion developed by Freud in the famous essay with the same title (1919). The uncanny is an object or situation which is alien yet arouses a sense of familiarity which causes it to be uncomfortable and strange. As Freud states: “In general we are reminded that the word ‘*heimlich*’ is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other what is concealed and kept out of sight” (224). This feeling manifests itself as both attraction to and rejection of the familiar/unfamiliar object, onto which the psyche projects repressed sexual impulses. Thus, the object itself becomes an uncanny scapegoat mirroring what is perceived as negative or threatening by the conscious mind.

Because sexuality is the expression of close intimacy between human beings – and vampires – the potentially disturbing psychological implications of this experience, repressed memories and “death-wishes,” are conveyed through the overt, graphic representation of the *True Blood* characters’ sexual activities, both homosexual and heterosexual. Nonetheless, despite all these negative features associated with sexuality, one of the approaches to the representation of romance in the show has also the function of paving the way for the characters’ inner development. One of the first narrative climaxes of the show is reached when, upon overcoming her initial naiveté, Sookie discovers the pain of being hurt by love and how trust is important to develop healthy relationships. Her romantic experiences end with a deep disillusionment; first, she has her heart broken when Bill lies to her about the sexual effects of vampire blood, which he

gave her to make her heal (“Strange Love”, 1.1).

Thus, she wonders if her feelings are the result of blood-drinking rather than a genuine attachment for him. Later, in season three, she is further disappointed when she discovers that Bill was after her on account of the vampire Queen Sophie-Anne because of her powers and supernatural fairy lineage. In spite of the heartbreak, in season four she decides to follow her feelings again and to start a relationship with Eric, despite Adele’s spirit, channelled through the witch Marnie as a voice-over, telling her “not to give him [her] heart... [because] the situation is temporary” (“Me and the Devil”, 4.5). She chooses not to follow this advice and ends up with another bitter disappointment.⁹ Although Sookie’s relationships have ultimately a negative outcome, the overall message is quite empowering. Because Sookie allows herself to make mistakes and overcome “the horror of intimacy,” she is the only person who is in charge of her own life and is confident in carrying on her choices, regardless of their potential consequences.

While criticism has addressed Sookie’s development as a romantic heroine, a fairly unexplored aspect concerns the potential “horror of intimacy” in the *True Blood* romance, highlighted by Freudian tones and contextualized within the Southern social and cultural setting. The questions which need further exploration are how the romance intersects with the issues of the American South today and its history, to be addressed in the second part of this chapter. In the show, the fear of proximity through romantic relationships concerns characters mainly at an individual level. However, if we consider this phenomenon as definitive of social dynamics, the natural opposition of the self to surrendering to another self is likely a metaphor for the widespread fear of the Other, which has proved a common pattern in many vampire narratives since Sheridan LeFanu’s *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

According to Ken Gelder, this concept is deeply rooted in the vampire’s nature. The vampire is traditionally always a vector for the Freudian uncanny, the repressed emerging from the subconscious, as a “self-image, a means of figuring socio-political-sexual excesses” (43). Thus, the audience’s self-recognition and projection of multiple anxieties onto this creature becomes quite natural and is a recurrent trope widely addressed by the criticism on the genre. However, no vampire is equal to the other, so much so that the multi-layered nuances he offers are quite “overburdened with meaning (especially archetypical meanings)” (137). The *True Blood* vampires use this characteristic to offer a representation of Otherness which deals with cultural anxieties that are the product of a specific historical occurrence.

The American Civil War has proven to be a painful event in Southern history, and its traumatic psychological effects seem to influence the relations between the *True Blood* vampires and humans on the screen. The show portrays how the consequences of the Civil War still permeate the contemporary South to a certain extent, specifically the South’s clash with the diffusion of capitalism and the reinforcement of issues of race, topics already addressed in this work. One of the defining moments of American history, the Civil War’s relevance goes beyond

9. Sookie’s negative experiences clash with the example provided by the *Twilight* saga, where romance is celebrated as the quintessential fulfilment of Bella’s life; she is absolutely certain of Edward’s good intentions and is never upset by his behavior, since the vampire Cullens are considered the embodiment of moral perfection and, thus, infallible.

the nineteenth century through the deep psychological scar which still affects the country. This may be likely explained by the nature of the event itself, which was more traumatic because it represented a deep fracture within the U.S. and put individuals of the “same blood” against each other.

In *True Blood*, the idea of blood-sharing between North and South may help explain the rejection of yet attraction to vampires, who as former humans are tied to mankind through a blood bond. Thus, this connection strongly indicates a form of incest, which is one of the Freudian taboos repressed into the subconscious and, as such, is particularly unsettling, in its metaphorical revelation of the South’s relationship with the invading vampire-Northerners. Historian Arthur Bestor calls the conflict a moment of absolute upheaval which shook the equilibrium of the country: “Powerful economic forces [...] were pitted against one another in the struggle. Profound moral perplexities were generated by the existence of slavery, and the attacks upon it had social and psychological repercussions of incredible complexity” (327).

If we consider Southern history as a source of collective trauma which is difficult to face and which has to be repressed into the regional unconscious, the connection between the extensive sexuality on the show and the issues behind the Civil War becomes clearer. The consistent presence of romance metaphorically expresses the modern South’s difficulties with coping with the two most relevant issues behind the Civil War: economics and race. The reasons these problems have persisted within the imaginary of the American South are several. On the one hand, the South was concerned that the Union’s economic and technological advancement threatened its interests and role within the national landscape, as the advent of “banks and corporations, tariffs, internal improvements, land grants to railroads, and free homesteads to settlers” (332) was pressuring the Southern plantation system. On the other hand, the issues around the practice of slavery were first and foremost addressed to its nature as “a labor system” (333), which constituted the backbone of the whole Southern economic structure – and its wealth. Indeed, at that time slavery was considered as a “good business and shrewd investment” (Ayers 55).

True Blood uses the traditional theme of intimacy with the vampire, hence with the threatening “Other,” to signify the impossibility of dealing with the Otherness at the centre of the Civil War. Indeed, the matter of slavery had, of course, a very racially-charged meaning. From the Southern perspective, slavery reinforced the white sovereignty over the land, as “a system of racial adjustment and social order” (Bestor 333). Therefore, the political system was based on the assumptions that slavery was a natural social phenomenon giving shape to the Southern organization of power, so much so that it is reasonable to affirm that racism was institutionally embedded within Southern social structures and was considered part of the South’s right to political independence.

As Ayers notes, “confederates claimed that they were also fighting for a cause of world-wide significance: self-determination. Playing down the centrality of slavery to their new nation, white Southerners built their case for independence on the right of free citizens to determine their political future” (54). Being unable to articulate fully the heritage of the Civil War, *True Blood* uses the theme of Sookie’s romance with Bill and Eric to project Southern historical anxieties

and to materialize them in the tangible form of the vampire. This figure uncannily brings Southern economic defeat into daylight and becomes a manifestation of a Southern inability to deal with the past. Clearly, the post-war disruption of Southern economy, power within the cotton market and way of perceiving and organizing social structures carried with it unresolved questions at a social and cultural level.

The shame of having their dreams of independence disrupted is probably part of widespread post-war feelings in the South. Ayers notices that “the white South claimed the mantle of victim, of a people forced to endure an unjust and unnatural subordination” (57). Because the North was considered responsible for the threat to Southern social and economic structure, the attitude towards the Yankees was not friendly in the South and based on racial hatred. Even before the war, it was common to define them as barbarian invaders (McPherson 107), a derogatory term evoking the destructive forces which caused the end of the Roman Empire. Thus, hatred against Northerners was deeply rooted in the South for both economic and cultural reasons. Dynamics have changed since then, but the prejudice against the North and its imposition of capitalism remains. In addition, although slavery was abolished, racism and its heritage did not disappear and has remained a recurrent social issue in Southern states until today.

In *True Blood* the fear of being in contact with vampires defines the dynamics of the “horror of intimacy” experienced by the characters and, in particular, Sookie. Sookie’s decision to deal with her own personal uncertainties about sexuality is a metaphor for the contemporary American South, which feels the need to come to terms with its own fears and past. However, the hostile way vampires are treated and portrayed in the show leaves the audience in discomfort where real closure on this issue has yet to come, revealing how the region is deeply divided between being open to the future by confronting the burden of the past and the incapacity to do so. That being said, as a contemporary media product, *True Blood*’s real narrative power is its ability to expose both this mass defense mechanism of repression and the attempt at healing. *True Blood* reveals that this process leading to self-awareness has already started, even though its depth and effectiveness remain uncertain.

2.4 Southern Gothic and Contemporary Southern Vampires

The first clue of re-emerging Southern social and cultural anxieties in *True Blood* is precisely the Southern Gothic setting of the show, which creates a perfect background to its vampire-romance narrative.¹⁰ The word “horror” in *True Blood* gains different meanings. Sexuality, blood-drinking, the representation of the domesticated vampire and the relationships

10. The Southern Gothic is a well renowned subgenre of American Gothic fiction, movies and TV. It is defined in part by the setting itself and is usually characterized by specific recurring tropes such as violence, criminality, the grotesque, hoodoo and voodoo, poverty and alienation, among others. As J.M. Flora et al. state, its purpose is specifically to provide, often through irony, a social criticism of the American South (315). Among the most relevant authors within this genre we find names such as William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Michael McDowell and Anne Rice. In media, the Southern Gothic comes back in many forms: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), *True Detective* (2014), just to list a few.

between these creatures and humans overlap with the Southern Gothic, which paints these themes in a dark tone. Using these tropes, the show offers ground upon which to discuss the contemporary American South and to expose its most uncomfortable scars to the audience in order to address the cultural and historical puzzles of this region. In the following section I will address the strategies deployed by the show to portray these social anxieties by analyzing a few traditional tropes of the horror genre. Also, I will discuss how the domestication of the *True Blood* vampire is used to indicate the American South's fear of Otherness. I will highlight how *True Blood* focuses on the region's sense of anxiety caused by the idea that behind normality could always hide the cultural and social unknown.

The show shares elements typical to the horror genre and adds new ones representing regional socio-cultural uncertainties "through encoding civil rights issues and the attendant social prejudices in the coming-out of the vampires" (Ruddel and Cherry 40). The Gothic genre is indeed by definition the place where disturbing psychological and social uncertainties come into light usually through a dark and macabre setting¹¹, often evoking more or less directly death. From a psychological perspective, this is the genre portraying the uncanny *par excellence*, as Freud himself hints in his essay about the disturbing effect of the familiar/unfamiliar analysing E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story titled *The Sandman*. In *True Blood* uncanny locations and situations are the order of the day. Scenes are often set in the local cemetery between Bill and Sookie's homes as a typical reference to the classic Gothic canon, metaphorically signifying that the boundaries between life and death are blurred and that life is ultimately transient. In addition, the narrative frequently revolves around Sookie's old house, which is again a common location in the genre and symbolically recalls the characters' psychological dimensions and hidden unconscious feelings.¹² Thus, Sookie's act of inviting vampires into her home, or revoking said invitation, is a gesture which metaphorically opens the door for the supernatural to enter her life and, at the same time, indicates that vampirization needs the victims' consent to operate, thus recalling a trope which, since *Dracula*, has been common within the vampire genre.

In *True Blood* these traditionally Gothic elements include Southern references, "combining them with particular concerns of the American South, and [...] the grotesque, the macabre, and very often, the violent" (David Punter and Glennis Byron 116-117). To take this

11. In place of the classic wild forests and woods often described in Gothic tales to evoke sublime feelings in the audience, the setting is here typical of the Louisianan landscape: "the humid subtropical climate, the lush woodlands, swamplands and bayous clothe and conceal the contours of the land beneath" (Ruddel and Cherry 41), which is the scenario of supernatural forces. I would add that the same setting is evident in *Interview with the Vampire* and shares the same supporting function to the narrative structure as in *True Blood*. For example, when Louis sees the dawn for the last time before becoming a vampire, the scene is pure Southern Gothic: it is set in the cemetery, surrounded by old tombs and statues, and close to a pond of stagnant water with trees covered by Spanish moss to signify metaphorically that his journey as human is over and his vampire life is about to begin.

12. The importance of Sookie's house sets itself in the long Gothic tradition representing the home/family as a space of horror: *Dracula's* castle, Dr. Jekyll's home and its back door, Laura's isolated mansion in *Carmilla*, just to provide a few famous examples. But also, as Magistrale comments: "From the Castle of Otranto, to the Usher mansion and the House of the Seven Gables, to Shirley Jackson's Hill House, and right up to the doors of the Overlook Hotel itself, the haunted house has represented, as [Stephen] King reminds us in *Danse [Macabre]*, an image of authoritarianism, of imprisonment, or of 'confining narcissism' [...] a growing obsession with one's own problems; a turning inward instead of a growing outward" (44).

point further, I would add that not only does the show draw on Southern Gothic patterns, but it reinterprets them through a slightly gory B-movie vein, as we are often shown unnecessary acts of violence with copious amounts of blood, when vampires are killed with stakes and end up in a bloody slime or when violent actions against humans also end up in bloodbaths. For example, when Sookie discovers her grandmother's dead body in her kitchen, the image of the woman's corpse on the floor in a pool of blood hits the audience with brutality and is reinforced through a close shot of Adele's face with her open, dead eyes ("Sparks Fly Out", 1.5). The cruelty of the scene is emphasized by the alternation of overhead shots of the body and a cut to a close-up of Sookie's face indicating the pain of her discovery. Chromatic opposition also plays a major role in this scene. The pure whiteness of Adele's nightgown and of the floor contrasts with the deep red of the blood, signifying that the character's innocence has not prevented such a violent act.

Another peculiarity of the Southern Gothic or, better, the Gothic in general as portrayed in *True Blood* is the inclusion of these macabre references within a perfectly normal, everyday setting to emphasize how the brutality of horror can enter people's lives unexpectedly. Because vampires are creatures of horror, the tendency to render them as normal people offers a peculiar interpretation of the modern domesticated undead. Indeed, who really is the *True Blood* vampire? The confusing answer to this question often leaves the audience in limbo. Unlike the undead of *Interview with the Vampire*, who are always portrayed as Western white individuals, these vampires do not conform to a precise somatic model and do not advertise themselves in such a way.

In one of the opening scenes of "Strange Love" (1.1), two young humans enter a shop to buy and drink Tru Blood, although it has proven to be dangerous for non-vampires. The owner appears to be the quintessential modern vampire: long black hair, pale skin, Goth clothes and a dangerous attitude which would make him a perfect non-dead. The scene is edited to alternate between medium right-hand shots of the teenagers and left-hand shots of the owner to create increasing tension. The sequence is interrupted a few times using straight cuts to brief close-up shots of a customer looking for drinks at the back of the shop. Straight cuts are widely used in filmmaking when "one image instantaneously replaces another" (Dick 64) and it is mainly used as a transition between different shots. In this case, the connection between these shots is reinforced by the synchronization of the characters' off-screen dialogue with the shots of the customer, a technique which enhances narrative continuity. The suspense reaches its peak when the owner claims to be a vampire. The camera suddenly frames a close-up of the owner's mouth from his left, as if the audience should expect him to show his fangs at any moment. The pathos of the image is reinforced by using a dramatic sound in the background.

The tension is unexpectedly released when the owner reveals in a laugh that he is a human and wanted to play a trick on the young teenagers. Overhearing the conversation, the other customer in the back slowly approaches the counter. He is nothing special. He seems to be an overweight, middle-aged man in unfashionable clothes. In other words, he is a "John Doe," like many others. Nonetheless, his appearance as a regular man is subverted as soon as he shows his fangs. The momentum of the scene is highlighted by a close shot of his vampire face and his pronouncing of not-so-friendly words to threaten the shop owner: "You pretend to be one of us again and I'll kill ya, got it?" and then, smiling like the best well-mannered American neighbour

would do, he adds: "...Have a nice day, now!" The scene subverts the audience's expectations, creating and dissolving tension through the unexpected.

This unnerving opening scene sets the tone for the seasons to follow. Detecting vampires is not an easy task and leaves the audience and even the characters of the show in suspense, wondering who the monster is and who the human is. This strategy is particularly effective in producing uncanny recognitions of Otherness, which become even more disturbing in the verisimilar Southern context of *True Blood*. Hence, eerie anxieties are amplified as the Southern Gothic erases the boundary between human and monster. In the *True Blood* world, anyone can be a vampire, and vampires can be anywhere, as Maxine Fortenberry discovers with disgust in season four. Maxine, a middle-aged, closed-minded Southern lady, has her suspicions confirmed when she sees her neighbour Viola burning in the daylight due to the witches' spell, which has forced all the vampires in Bon Temps to "meet the sun" ("Cold Grey Light of Dawn", 4.7). Without a doubt, Viola is a vampire, even though her physicality has little of the "vampiresque": she is a corpulent lady, resembling Maxine a lot – more of a quiet housewife than a dangerous creature of the night.

On the contrary, Eric and Bill, the male protagonists of the story, are rendered more as the "typical" modern vampires. Richards-Bodart makes the point that in general the main features of the contemporary undead are that they are "powerful, strong, handsome and immortal" (18), and these two vampires fit this description quite well. Nonetheless, they provide us with two very different typologies of vampires. Eric is a six-foot-tall, blonde, dangerous Viking with icy eyes. Bill, however, has more the countenance and appearance of an old-fashioned Southern gentleman, with an intense look conjugating well with his pale complexion, which has a consistent resemblance to Louis and Lestat's ghostly appearance in *Interview with the Vampire*.

From the examples above it is possible to understand how *True Blood* produces its own version of the modern domesticated vampire, a theme already approached in the first part of this work. However, these vampires offer a different take on the modern vampire: the inclusion of variety in their physical features and their seeming normality superficially erase their supernatural essence. Except for the vampires' common weaknesses – here sunlight, allergies to garlic and silver – these creatures' physicality is domesticated in the sense that it is familiarized for the audience. This twist, common in contemporary vampire fiction, facilitates the viewers' process of identification, making the *True Blood* vampires more sympathetic creatures. Nonetheless, even though the audience is able to empathize with them, this does not imply that these new Southern vampires are less threatening. The conundrum is the balance between these creatures' seemingly normal appearance and their Otherness which generates social anxiety. The show plays with the space in between these two aspects to convey the message that the American South has a deeply rooted fear of dealing with diversity, especially if it is disguised as normality.

This uncanny feeling is reinforced by the portrayal of blood-drinking in the show. The *True Blood* characters fit well with Richard-Bodart's description of the modern undead: "people who look like us, who are natural predators and struggle with the ethical issues that result from that behavior" (17). This statement refers to the second, but not less important, feature of the domesticated vampire: his moral doubts about drinking human blood. However, Stacey Abbot

argues that the *True Blood* vampires' seeming domestication makes them "sympathetic because [...] they are victims of prejudice" (34). In her view, the *True Blood* undead are considered domesticated vampires not due to their ethical issues concerning blood-drinking but because they endure social discrimination which makes them more sympathetic to the audience. On the contrary, I would argue that these creatures' status as vampires with a soul is still tied to these moral dichotomies. In other contemporary vampire narratives such as *Twilight*, for example, the Cullens' "vegetarian" diet draws a very neat line between the good and the bad vampires, namely the Volturi. Conversely, in *True Blood* the distinction between good and evil vampires is more complicated and creates a wide grey area of uncertainty.

In the show, vampires are offered an alternative to human blood. The Japanese *True Blood* has indeed allowed them to "come out from their coffins" (Harris *Dead Until Dark* 3). Like the idiom "coming out of the closet," a metaphor for acknowledging one's homosexuality in public, "coming out of the coffin" in *True Blood* indicates to affirm one's identity or diversity and deal with mainstream life. "Every member of our community is now drinking synthetic blood. That's why we decided to make our existence known. We just want to be part of mainstream society," as Nan Flanagan, the spokesperson for the Vampire Authority, states ("Strange Love," 1.1).

Hence, the contrast between the vampires' desire to be normal and their Otherness is enhanced once again. The *True Blood* vampires' diversity cannot be erased but it is hidden behind closed doors and, thus, is always lurking around ready to take over the American South. Indeed, Eric speaks a more realistic truth: "Tru Blood... It keeps you alive, but it bores you to death" ("Plaisir d'Amour", 1.9). This point clearly implies both that he has not given up on drinking human blood and that he does not have any ethical issues with this, since he considers the act enjoyable.¹³ In other words, vampires in the show can exercise their free will because they can decide to drink the synthetic beverage or keep feeding on humans. Critics such as William M. Curtis question the *True Blood* vampire's ability to have a choice on this matter because their irreducible Otherness generated by their differences from humans is impossible to overcome. He writes of "the sorts of supernatural yearnings that vampires might be subject to, not to mention the way vampire maker-child and vampire-human blood bond relationships seem to compromise if not destroy free will" (87).

Although vampires have, indeed, irreconcilable differences with humans, I argue that the issue concerning their freedom does not directly connect to their status as Others. The reasons behind their decisions to drink human blood or not are different than we might expect, not exactly corresponding to the moral dichotomies experienced by the modern domesticated vampire model. For example, Louis in *Interview with the Vampire* is the first modern vampire with a conscience who deeply feels the burden of his nature. Because his biting always leads necessarily to the victim's death, this inevitable result causes Louis to feel like he is "drowning in a sea of human guilt and regret" (*Interview with the Vampire*), thus inducing him to self-hate. Instead of ethical issues, in *True Blood* biting and mainstreaming are a matter of conforming to a

13. In the books, Eric reinforces this concept by shockingly revealing to Sookie that vampires consider humans mainly a source of food and as quasi-pets, "very much in the same relationships to humans as humans have to say, cows. Edible like cows but, cute, too" (*Dead as a Doornail* 214).

series of conventionalities which “requires participation in a way of life shaped by the rules of human society. Vampires are expected to mimic the customs, manners, emotions, and behaviors of the human beings around them” (Culver 25).

Taking this point further, I would say that refusing to drink human blood in *True Blood* not only is a conformist act, but it is more of a façade for social acceptance which has nothing to do with the vampire’s real sense of guilt. It is merely a necessary step in order to live in the mainstream South. Bill, in particular, better represents the unique take of the *True Blood* vampires on the topic. Bill drinks Tru Blood as a way to appear non-threatening to humans and to legitimize his presence among them. In “Strange Love” (1.1) when he enters Merlotte’s for the first time he asks Sookie to bring him some “synthetic bottled blood,” and as she answers that they do not have any, he asks her to bring him a glass of wine so he has “a reason to be here.” In other words, he is trying to mingle with humans as a normal customer would.

However, this sequence is edited in a way to suggest his separation from mortal life. He is framed alone through a frontal medium shot, sitting at one of the tables while the lights enhance his unnatural paleness. Bill’s shots alternates with frontal medium shots of Sookie, which in this case may be defined as point of view shots because they suggest the idea that the two characters are looking intensely at each other. The instant attraction Sookie feels for Bill is enhanced by a shot which changes from a medium frame of her figure to a close-up of her face through a slowly right-to-left camera movement, reinforced by a swift sound. The purpose of this shot is to indicate that she has recognized that the vampire is different from humans because she is unable to read his mind. Then, the camera slowly changes from medium shots to close-ups of Sookie and Bill to indicate increasing psychological proximity between the two.

The next shot of Sookie slowly walking towards him highlights how they are already connected and drawn to each other, defining an imaginary boundary between them and the other human customers at Merlotte’s. Sam, the bar owner, very smartly remarks that vampires will never quit drinking blood and sarcastically tells Sookie to put herself in their shoes: “Are you willing to pass up all your favorite foods and spend the rest of your life drinking Slim-Fast?” This is indeed true, as Bill has not given up drinking human blood, although he does not kill humans if not completely necessary. For example, he does not hesitate to drink Sookie’s blood as they get intimate. Although he asks permission to do so, this has little to do with his remorse over feeding on a human but rather is more of a response to Sookie’s words “I want you to” (“Burning House of Love”, 1.7).

If I consider both the *True Blood* vampires’ physicality and their free will concerning their drinking of human blood, they evoke sympathetic feelings in the audience in a different way than other contemporary vampire narratives, such as *Twilight*, do. The process of identification takes a different path because it does not offer a perfect physical model or fashionable lifestyle as the Cullens do in the *Twilight* series. Here, the audience can relate sympathetically to the vampire because his behavior resembles humans in everyday life: vampires’ behavior is based on personal choices and their own values. Despite their supernatural nature, which clearly separates them from humans, these creatures are not intrinsically good or bad but rather they represent the shades of grey in between. Negating the vampire’s intrinsic evil

allows *True Blood* to avoid providing the audience with a definite answer or judgement about their monstrosity or lack thereof.

These vampires' power is ultimately to make the Southern Gothic even more disturbing, confounding their human-like complexity with unexpected horrific behaviors. Hence, in *True Blood* the generation of horror is more frightening because the monster is more similar to the human and, thus, the line between the two is blurred. From a Southern perspective, this indicates that social anxieties generated by Otherness are potentially behind every corner and uncanny feelings are the only possible response to the lack of distinction between normality and monstrosity. However, while the show is good at depicting these contradictions, it does not provide a resolution to the uncanny feelings generated by them, creating a constant tension throughout the series.

2.5 The American Civil War and the Implications of Capitalism in *True Blood*

The *True Blood* representation of the “horror of intimacy” connected to the vampires' sexuality becomes a socio-cultural awakening process which uses the trope of capitalism to try exorcising the anxieties rooted in the events of the Civil War. The portrayal of the “horror of intimacy” is not limited to the Southern Gothic *mise-en-scène* and vampire-human relationships but also extends to the sociological context of the American South. Isaac Tylin claims that “horror movies in general, and vampire ones in particular, capitalize on the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in order to master them” (282). However, while *True Blood* effectively addresses these issues on screen, whether it is fully able to overcome these fears and lead to a final catharsis seems controversial. The portrayal of these elements also questions the success of the show's attempt to overcome the stereotypical representation of the South as the most conservative and racist region of the United States.

With the contradictions in Sookie's romance with the vampires and her subsequent character development, the core concept of *True Blood* is to portray how intimacy can be unsettling and create a psychological change. This strategy follows the rules of horror movies which explore and expose the range of painful human psychological anxieties and fears to create self-awareness, if not catharsis. More specifically, as discussed in the previous section, intimacy in *True Blood* speaks to the complex identification of the vampire with Freudian drives of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. In the show, these impulses are projected through the representation of human attraction to and rejection of the vampires' sexuality as a social metaphor for the horrors of the Civil War. This collective psychological projection refers to the Southerners' perception of the war as a moment of both the creation of a new order and the destruction of the old one as they fought for their own independence, and it is particularly representative of the failure subsequent to this process.

In this section I will describe how the show's negative portrayal of the vampire-capitalist is used to materialize the feelings of *Thanatos* surrounding the disastrous outcome of the War. Embodying Northern capitalist forces, the *True Blood* vampires are perceived as invading enemies yet are accompanied by an ambiguous sense of attraction. This contradictory perception is likely a consequence of Freudian psychological mechanisms in which humans are

subconsciously attracted to what can destroy them yet appears to be repressed within the Southern collective psyche. In order to understand these dynamics it is first necessary to discuss how the theme of capitalism in *True Blood* is addressed by current criticism.

According to Caroline Ruddel and Brigid Cherry, the show uses Gothic tropes to provide “a critique of the American Dream” (50), and its peculiarity is not to lead to a final resolution of the matter but to leave the issue open. Their analysis is mainly focused on Sam Merlotte’s role as a business man. Because he owns several houses and a bar, Sam is granted a better social position than many other citizens in Bon Temps, even though behind this façade of a good citizen he conceals a shady past as a criminal and a murderer. In Ruddel and Cherry’s view, this moral corruption interferes with the character’s ability to “live up to the concepts of success implicit in the American Dream” (51). However, their approach does not consider precisely why Sam is associated with negative behaviours such as dishonesty and killing.

Ruddel and Cherry’s analysis has the advantage of hinting at a larger contextualization of the issue of economics within the Southern Gothic setting of the show. I agree with their perspective that *True Blood* criticizes the myth of the American Dream and its obsession for gaining wealth and social status while concealing a questionable morality. However, their criticism seems not to create connections between the failure of the American Dream and the vampires in the show, even though this concept could relate better to these characters rather than the shapeshifter Sam. The reason behind the dismissal of the American Dream lies in the disappointing outcome of the Civil War itself, at least in this context. The *True Blood* vampires act as a social critique of the negative effects of Northern capitalism which affected the Civil War and fuelled the Southern hatred against the Union.

Therefore, embodying these aspects of the War, Bill and Eric are here perceived as the “Other” to marginalize and reject. Through the horror of intimacy generated from Sookie’s romance with these two vampires, we are shown how the Southern fear of Yankees’ socio-cultural contamination is still strong. The Yankee theme is strongly connected to the Marxist interpretation of the vampire and this theoretical framework strongly influences the approach to capitalism embodied in the *True Blood* vampires. However, the Southern perspective on capitalist systems operates as a filter which causes a consistent change in the representation of the classic vampire-capitalist. While vampires promote traditionally a lifestyle based on capitalistic accumulation and materialism, the *True Blood* vampires embody some of the same features but with the opposite outcome: feelings of dismissal.

2.5.1 Bill Compton

The theoretical background linking the vampire to capitalistic forces, which has already been explored in this work, is a constant presence in *True Blood*. Bill’s portrayal is the first example of the perceived threat of bourgeois capitalism for the American South. Also, it is a good example of the anxieties surrounding the vampire-capitalist in the South as a form of social critique against the traumatic feelings derived from the experience of the Civil War. To explore fully the character’s connections with these issues, it is first important to analyze Bill’s relation with the community of Bon Temps. Similar to the Cullens, Bill attempts to live at peace with

humans by choosing a middle-class position considered socially normative by humans. Before becoming a vampire during the Civil War, William Compton was one of the founding members of the community of Bon Temps.¹⁴ When he joined the conflict, leaving his family behind, he experienced the horrors of war which ended up revealing how Southern ideals were trivial compared to the price of losing innocent lives.

In modern times, when Sookie asks Bill to speak at a meeting of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead, an association re-uniting the heirs of the soldiers who fought in the Civil War, we see a close shot of his face to emphasize the importance of the moment. He answers: "There's nothing glorious about dying at war. A bunch of starving and freezing boys trying to kill each other so that rich people can stay rich" ("First Taste", 1.2). Although Sookie replies to him that it should have been an awful experience, her modern perspective on the Civil War is based on a celebratory mode that praises the Southern attempt to seek independence.

The detachment between Bill and Sookie is also conveyed by visual editing which strongly suggests separation. In filmic language the act of portraying two subjects in the same frame usually suggests emotional proximity and connection. On the contrary, this scene is edited using frames of the individual characters which alternate on the screen as the dialogue unfolds, creating a parallel between their opposing views and a psychological distance between the two. This is also suggested by the setting; the scene is set at night, in the outdoors, under a few street lights and close to Spanish moss. It uses the gloomy Southern background to enhance the separation between the characters, perhaps metaphorically indicating that the darkness surrounding them is similar to the darkness surrounding the remaining taboo of the war today.

This darkness also metaphorically connects to and externalizes the romantic relationship between Bill and Sookie to make a parallel between the obscurity of the girl's psychologically and socially repressed Southern subconscious and the vampire's value as a catalyst for the re-emergence of the uncanny feelings surrounding the Civil War. Indeed, Sookie seems not to understand how, beyond its shiny modern interpretation, the war was actually a traumatic event for an entire generation of Southerners. She also does not realize that celebrating the myth of the Civil War and Southern independence glorifies and romanticizes the past, obscuring the suffering of those who experienced its horrors.

Indeed, now that he is a vampire, Bill harshly criticizes the Southern attitude that celebrates the war, so much so that his vampirism symbolizes an anti-Southern perspective, as he refuses to embrace the widespread idealization of the conflict. However, he decides to share his past life as a soldier with the association to please Sookie and, ultimately, to become empathetic with the community of Bon Temps. The scene involves a long sequence of frontal medium shots of Bill speaking from the City Church podium, alternating with wide-angle frames of the people

14. The assonance between the name Compton and William Faulkner's Compson family, at the center of his Southern saga, seems an homage to the long literary tradition of the region as well as a statement concerning Bill's Southern provenance. The Compson family appeared in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936) and briefly in *Requiem for a Nun* (1950). Through these characters Faulkner explores themes such as the value of Southern past as a constant presence in the present, the rise and fall of the plantation system, family dynasty and the validity of truth, among the most important ones.

in the audience, who seem to empathize with him, for the most part. As Bill speaks about his experience, he manages to establish a connection with the citizens of Bon Temps showing that people should not be afraid of him because, as Adele says, “he is a perfect gentleman” (“Sparks Fly Out”, 1.5). And a good quasi-political orator. The way he is portrayed suggests, indeed, respectability and tends to induce a non-verbal message of trust in his audience: he wears an elegant light-grey suit which enhances his vampiric complexion, his firm posture conveys self-assurance and the tone of his speech is solemn.

In other words, to seek people’s approval, he wears the mask of a respectable member of the community, saying: “As a patriot of this great nation, I wouldn’t dream of puttin’ myself before Old Glory” (1.5) and he puts the American flag, used to cover a cross, back to its place. He even shows a more human side as he recalls the death of one of his friends during the war, and when he is given a photo of himself and his family taken in 1862, he gets emotional and cries tears of blood, thus showing that he is making an effort to be part of the human community. Even if he knows that vampires and humans are different, he is convinced that “if [they] reach out to one another, [they] can actually coexist” (1.5). However, his purpose is not accomplished because the people in Bon Temps do not fully trust him despite superficial signs of acceptance, such as taking pictures with him or seemingly empathizing with him during his presentation. This on-screen reaction could be a self-conscious hint for the real audience behind the screen. It may suggest a critique of the contemporary Southern attitude that entertains a shallow connection with the war and possibly the inability to address the scars of the past. It recalls the “postcard allure” built around history instead of opting for an objective and constructive approach based on conscious understanding. As Jamil Khader writes:

Recent theories of trauma have emphasized Freud’s diagnosis of its belatedness (*nachträglich*), which results from the victim’s failure to comprehend, let alone communicate, the traumatic experience and make it accessible to the conscious mind. [...] Registered into their unconscious, this traumatic experience, or “traumatic neurosis” as he calls it, can only be assimilated belatedly after a period of latency. (79)

Again, Freudian theories concerning the idea that subjects construct an illusory reality to cope with traumatic experiences is a subtext appearing quite clearly in the portrayal of the *True Blood* vampires and, in particular, of Bill’s.

These hidden Southern anxieties connect with Bill’s quasi-obsession for mainstreaming and seeking social acceptance. This process metaphorically refers to the bourgeois capitalist system overriding over the traditional Southern socio-economic model, a process evident in the vampires’ assuming upstanding social positions in the show. Because Bill wants to live at peace with humans, his first step to social re-integration is to regain his old family mansion, empty after the last descendant of the Comptons died. This is a symbolic re-appropriation of the position he had as a human and a re-acquisition of his middle-class status, which is seen with discomfort by the people of Bon Temps. Although Bill’s occupation before becoming a vampire is unclear, his family of origin was socially well positioned. Even though he did not own any slaves, he admits that his father owned a few (“The First Taste”, 1.2), which at that time represented a clear symbol of status and wealth, but he shamefully admits that those were different times. Criticism has not widely explored this aspect, although it has emphasized how

Bill's mainstreaming is peculiar because it is abandoned when vampire obligations force him to (Culver 26). For example, he clumsily deals with a visiting vampire nest, which turns out to be dangerous for the people in town, and later he hypnotizes a police officer to avoid being arrested after he escaped with Sookie from Fangtasia ("Escape from Dragon House", 1.4).

Despite his inconsistent mainstreaming, Bill attempts to live as a regular middle-class individual. At the end of season three, when he kills Queen Marie Ann, he is appointed by Vampire Authority representative Nan Flanagan as the new vampire King of Louisiana, gaining power and importance within the vampire world, which has the consequence of increasing consistently his prestige and income. To show his new social position, he renovates his old colonial home and decorates it with very expensive, modern furniture, a tangible expression of his wealth. He owns a computer and, in season one, he even buys himself a Wii, a videogame platform, to have the illusion of "playing" golf in daylight.

The purchase of these objects has a relevant function in *True Blood*. Bill attempts to conform to the bourgeois lifestyle through the acquisition of everyday objects that indicate an upper middle-class status. Max Weber's notion of "status group" is useful to understand the dynamics behind Bill's consumerist behaviors. According to Weber, individuals' belonging to upper or lower status groups, as well as their social prestige, are defined by their "style of life" (341) and their consumption habits. Indeed, as O' Dair points out, a consequence of buying status-objects is to affirm one's economic position: "In consumer culture, old rituals of class disappear but a new morality of class emerges in its place, just as an older "notion of status [...] tends increasingly to simplify and to coincide with the notion of 'social standing'" (346). Bill's acquiring of trivial human objects allows *True Blood* to offer an updated version of the traditional vampire-capitalist. Marx claims quite clearly that the vampire-capitalist never invests money on trivial objects which could diminish his fortune, because his ultimate purpose is to satisfy his devouring desire for compulsive accumulation. Instead, even if Bill has accumulated capitals, his attitude is the opposite. He prefers to reinvest his wealth in luxury objects because he has to *perform* his privilege through a lifestyle tangibly expressing social conformism to humans' way of living.

From the contemporary capitalistic perspective, expensive fetish objects are the very symbol of vampires' capitalistic possessions, and for this reason, they need to be acquired and used. Also, this may be read more generally as the contemporary vampires' fulfilment of the wish for integration with human society, which leads them to embrace the very materialistic values at the core of this system to be socially accepted. While the old vampire-capitalist's behavior is driven by blind selfishness for the accumulation of the working class' blood – and capital – the *True Blood* vampire trades the capital accumulated with the illusion of belonging to the humans' group.

Indeed, Bill lives his human-like life through the acquisition of material possessions to "play human" in order to seek social acceptance. Nonetheless, his consumerist lifestyle is not portrayed as an example to pursue and it is negatively presented to the audiences. Although Bill becomes progressively aware of his social position and tries to use it to live his mainstream life to meet the standards of human life, his attempts fail. Despite his good will to coexist with

humans, in season one, he is the target of local authorities who suspect him of having killed the women in Bon Temps, and he is not trusted because he is a vampire. However, he is never seen as part of the Bon Temps community even after he proves himself not to be a threat to the local humans. He continues always to be addressed as “Bill the Vampire,” and the fact that he was once a Southerner is completely disregarded.

In other words, Bill’s passage from being a Civil War hero to being a vampire, which metaphorically stands for adopting capitalist behavior, determines his unavoidable marginalization in this fictional American South. On top of representing capitalism Bill is also a constant (un)living reminder of the disaster of the secessionist movement, embodying the failure of the American South. His turning to bourgeois behaviours and consumerist lifestyle, a consequence of the capitalist system imported from the North, is proof that the outcome of the Civil War is negative and associated with a sort of Yankee socio-cultural contamination in the South. In a certain way, his vampirism is a symbol of this very contamination, because he ends up conforming to the capitalist economics he fought against when he was a human. Indeed, his ultimate prosperity is generated through materialism: having a nice home and “human” objects, which apparently integrates him but actually sets him aside from the vast majority of the working-class people living in Bon Temps.

With the exception of the already mentioned Sam, the other characters in the show clearly belong to lower classes. For example, Jason, Sookie’s brother, works for the parish supervising a crew repairing roads in Bon Temps and later becomes one of the local deputies. Arlene, Sookie’s best friend, is a single mother and works as one of the barmaids at Merlotte’s. Lafayette and Tara, the most important African American characters in the show, have a low-income social position. Lafayette works as a cook at Merlotte’s and in Jason’s crew, while illegally selling the drug V – standing for “vampire blood” – on behalf of Eric Northman. Tara is even poorer; she does not have a steady job and continuously struggles with her alcoholic mother. Therefore, the socio-cultural background of Bon Temps is mainly constituted by components of the working class whose lifestyle clashes with Bill’s.

To sum up, *True Blood* fosters the message that vampirism is negatively connected with both consumerism and the past of the Deep South. Because materialism in the show is presented as negative, the value of the vampire-capitalist model remains traditionally negative as well. Marxist theories, as discussed in this work, have offered an interpretation of the vampire which compares his blood-sucking to the process of capital accumulation and the exploitation of the working class. As Mark Neocleous states: “In *Capital* this possibility of capital literally sucking the life out of the workers is fed into the paramount political question concerning the length of the working day. Capital, with its desire for endless and incessant accumulation, runs the risk of literally working the working class to death” (681). According to Jason J. Morrisette, it is indeed typical of vampire narratives to mark a precise line between life (the working class) and death (the vampire) because it creates “a social demarcation between vampire and victim. Bill Compton [...] gives voice to this division when he matter-of-factly declares to his human paramour, ‘I am not human, Sookie. I am vampire’” (“Burning House of Love,” 1.7 in Morrisette 639).

While Morrisette analyzes Stoker's Dracula feeding on Lucy as a metaphor for the Marxist alienation of the working class, he does not consider in particular a more important aspect connecting Bill to capitalist theories: his sucking Sookie's blood. Bill advances the capitalist theoretical background, even though the reference is more implicit in his case. Although Bill drinks Tru Blood, he keeps living because of the Southern blood he spilled through the centuries, and he continues to do so when he feeds on Sookie's blood. The fact that Sookie is a barmaid with a limited education defines her low social status and positions her in the working class. Hence, Bill's feeding on her metaphorically indicates the vampire's affirmation of his bourgeois power over lower social classes.¹⁵ Therefore, although Sookie is unwilling to be relegated to this role, the economic component of her relationship with the vampire invokes a subordination typical of Marxist class conflicts.

Also, interpreting bloodsucking from a purely Freudian point of view, the act of biting conceals the access to a forbidden sexual dimension which induces perturbing reactions in the subject. *True Blood* seems to share with older vampire representation, such as the figure of Dracula, these very anxieties signifying a deeper connection with a painful experience. Discussing these issues in relation to Otherness in Bram Stoker's novel, Khader writes that "these endless vampiric attacks [are] overwhelming psychic and mental events that not only shatter the victims' subjectivities, memories, and worldly experience, but also resist seamless integration into consciousness, full knowledge, and representation" (75). The same interpretation may be applied to the *True Blood* vampires as well because these characters carry out the same function as Dracula, yet with a few peculiarities. If we frame these vampires in the context of the Civil War, they embody capitalism, which is *per se* a traumatic experience from a Southern perspective.

Hence, Bill's bloodsucking offers a multi-layered variety of meanings. All of them deal with Southern anxieties over being colonized by Northern capitalist invading forces. In this aspect, the *True Blood* vampires recall Stephen Arata's concept of "counter-colonization," already discussed in this work, for which the Nosferatu embodies the concern with being culturally contaminated by Othered subjects. *True Blood* follows older representations which disguise this alien "Other," come from afar to threaten stability, behind the idea that the danger actually can also come from the inside. Therefore, a more appropriate definition of the process perhaps would be "intra-colonization," since it is generated by an internal force rather than external. Not only is the consequence of this process negative to the Southern collective psyche, but it also enhances the impossibility of addressing the past in a healthy way. Although during the 1800s the South claimed to be culturally detached from the North to justify its own independence, the word "Civil" before "War" should not be forgotten as part of the equation, as it implies that, willingly or not, the same blood was spilled on the battlefield, generating a severe psychological distress which still echoes in *True Blood* today through the stigmatization of the vampire.

15. In *Dead Until Dark*, the idea of vampires' control over the working class is reinforced when Bill tries to take care of Sookie economically by buying her new clothes and other expensive objects, even though Sookie's reaction is actually of discomfort as she feels like a "kept woman".

2.5.2 Eric Northman

In *True Blood*, representations of Southern trauma are reinforced by the inclusion of another character who can be read through the lenses of capitalism. If Bill may be considered as the embodiment of the invading Northern capitalism in *True Blood*, Eric Northman is the “vampire-capitalist 2.0.”¹⁶ The Marxist interpretation of the vampire is best presented in *True Blood* through Eric, owner of the vampire bar Fangtasia and a real “extraordinary Viking hero” (Mukherjea 117). When analyzing the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Debora Mutch has already discussed the connection between the undead and money. She claims that money is central to the novels because Charlaine Harris “imbricate[s] vampires and humans through business” (76) and “places trade, capital, and exchange at the heart of her new society: her American vampire population is as recent as the US, and their entry into the country was facilitated by human trade routes” (80). While Mutch recognizes the influence of capitalist theories on the *True Blood* vampires, she focuses more on Louisiana as a centre for U.S immigration, whose multiculturalism led to a perceived breach in the American cultural and economic superiority.¹⁷

I would like to expand the relevance of capitalist theories to *True Blood* and focus my analysis on why Eric is the embodiment of the real tycoon in the show, rather than specifically referring to immigration issues as previous criticism has emphasized. I will explain why this character best represents the vampire-capitalist’s negative features and why his portrayal is influenced by a Southern perspective, which turns him into a perceived threat. As in Bill’s case, I will frame Eric in the Freudian ambiguity surrounding the attraction to this vampire character, who uses allusions to the Marxist interpretation of the vampire as a decoy for massive social anxieties of the American South.

Before proceeding to describe Eric’s vampire-capitalist nature, it is necessary to understand the type of vampire which his character embodies. As an undead, he is one of the most ancient vampires in Louisiana, and since vampires become stronger with age, his one-thousand-year lifespan makes him very powerful. From the beginning of the show he is characterized as a ruthless, amoral vampire only interested in keeping and, possibly, expanding his power. This is in part suggested by his roots: he was son to a Viking king and born a warrior right before the Middle Ages. It does not seem incidental that Eric is associated with populations ruling Northern Europe and that, after all his long years as a vampire, he has settled down in

16. The choice of this surname for the vampire Eric is allusive as in Bill’s case. As the “Man from the North”, he is a clear reference to the tense Southern relation with the Yankees during the Civil War. The connection between the vampires as a force threatening to invade the American South appears to be a hinted subtext here and matches Eric’s character development in the show.

17. Mutch clearly expresses her approach as a connection between capitalism, immigration and history of Louisiana: “Eric recognises the importance of New Orleans and the Mississippi for the expansion of the newly independent United States of America when he continues the previous quotation with a reference to how ‘the Louisiana Purchase made a great difference’ (Harris, 2003, 38). The Spanish secession of the territory of Louisiana to the French in 1800 posed a potential threat to the expansionist visions of the young country and its freedom of trade. Thomas Jefferson bought the land from the French in 1803 to give the American government control of New Orleans, an essential gateway for American trade including the export of cotton and tobacco. It was also, according to Eric, the place of entry for its immigrant vampire population” (Mutch 80-81).

Louisiana, at the core of the American South.

Hence, Eric is “Other” because he is a vampire, because he is not American and because he is specifically non-Southern. These aspects are key to interpreting the symbolic value of this character in the show. Eric reminds the audience that during the Civil War Northerners were identified with hordes of barbarians, as mentioned early in this chapter, and that his ancient Swedish roots define his alien nature even further, so that his merciless personality seems to have generated from his über-Otherness. This process creates a connection between Southern social anxieties and the idea that Eric is an outside invader, a perception which carries with it a series of meaningful references to the troublesome relationship between the South and its Northern neighbours.

The first time Eric appears in *True Blood*, all of these features are implicitly conveyed through a very careful *mise-en-scène*. In “Escape from the Dragon House” (1.4) he is at Fangtasia, sitting on a throne, with long blonde hair and dressed all in black, while watching the customers and the vampires in the building. This physically privileged position indicates the power he embodies among both humans and supernatural creatures. Indeed, not only does he own the bar, but he has also been appointed Sheriff of Area 5 by the Vampire Authority, meaning that he is responsible for enforcing vampire law on the undead living in Louisiana. As the camera moves from Eric to the bar, the connection between his social role and money becomes clear, as this switch signifies that he is in absolute control over the (economic) activities in the building.

Eric, indeed, manages a business which is based on the income generated by the humans’ wish to come into contact with the supernatural. Human clients, derogatorily called “fangbangers,” go to his bar to meet (and possibly have sexual intercourse) with vampires. Sookie herself defines with disgust Fangtasia as the place “where all those pathetic people come ... Looking for sex with vampires” (“The Fourth Man in the Fire”, 1.8). A Southern version of Jiminy Cricket, Sookie manifests in this particular occasion a more sexually repressed attitude and a hint of moralizing prudery. Nonetheless, she effectively anticipates how the association of sex with the Fangtasia bar, the symbol of business success in the show, reveals a critique of Northern capitalism itself, possibly perceived as amoral, dark and as “dirty” as Freudian sexual impulses themselves.

This complex parallel is suggested by the interior of Fangtasia itself, which recalls the “vampire business” very well. Ruddel and Cherry highlight how the bar is the quintessential expression of the Gothic vampire genre:

The color of the interior design and decor is predominantly red and black, there are skulls and cross motifs on the stage lighting, and [Eric’s throne is] on the raised dais surrounded by swagged red brocade curtains. [...] The Bar is also brightly lit by sleek contemporary uplighters, table lamps, vibrantly coloured neon logos cut to the dark colour scheme [...] kitsch posters of vampires biting the Statue of Liberty on the walls and a merchandise stall near the entrance. (47)

While Ruddel and Cherry correctly identify the dark features of Fangtasia to define the pertinence of the Gothic genre in the show, I would like to draw the attention to how their

analysis is also useful to describe the connection between vampirism and capitalism. The classic Gothic symbolism of the place, with its black and red color scheme clearly associated with the vampires' feeding and undead life, merges with the business nature of Fangtasia, and this mixture seems to become Eric's medium within which to pursue his money-making. Eric exploits the fascination exerted by the vampires, enacting a very conscious marketing strategy which "sells" humans what they expect to see and experience from the vampire world: biting and sex. In order to gain money and success, Eric offers a "dating place" at the edges of legality where humans can find supernatural sex partners, while vampires can satisfy their blood thirst, although (officially) neither act is permitted inside the bar.

Fangtasia seems to subvert the psychological dynamics of the "horror of intimacy" already analyzed in this chapter. So far, we have come to know the vampire as a symbolic catalyst hinting at a less conservative future for the American South, which is represented by Sookie's dealing with her sexual attraction to Eric and Bill as part of her self-discovery and growth. Instead, the "horror of intimacy" offered by Fangtasia gives voice to the dark side of the human emotional spectrum through the representation of the vampires' sexuality almost as a form of prostitution. Indeed, unlike the majority of the *True Blood* locations, the bar offers a controlled space where the contact with Otherness is expected and ultimately allowed. Freudian sexual repression seems to be bypassed when portraying the human-vampire relationship behind the doors of Fangtasia, where transgression and the will to push boundaries is precisely the intent to be fulfilled.

In this case, the Other's proximity is objectified and becomes an item for economic exchange. Therefore, the anxieties around the contact with Otherness are simply dismissed rather than genuinely overcome because capitalist principles justify such a proximity and override the Southern fear of contamination. Indeed, Eric carries on the dynamics of the vampire-capitalist in a literal way since he is using blood as a medium to accumulate his own wealth. As Morrisette points out, "capitalists are, in effect, draining away the value of their workers' labor to enrich themselves – just as supernatural vampires drains their victims' life force to grow stronger" (639).

Blood becomes for Eric also a form of illicit money-making which illegally boosts his profits, thus reinforcing the idea that the vampire-capitalist is an immoral force. Indeed, Fangtasia is not only a place where Eric creates opportunities for vampires to drink human blood for the sake of his money-making. Eric also uses the bar as a cover to sell illegally V as a drug to humans on behalf of Queen Marie-Ann. He carries on this trade behind the Vampire Authority's back, as the Authority defines this act as blasphemy since vampire blood is considered sacred. While keeping his fair share of profits, Eric is pursuing criminal acts to help the Queen avoid losing "all her properties after the Great Revelation" ("9 Crimes", 3.4). Eric also does not hesitate to torture Lafayette because the cook is selling V behind his back, even though he later tries to make amends by giving Lafayette a very expensive car as a present to "buy" his silence on the matter. Hence, economic reasons and money in general seem to drive Eric's function as a character and again have a prominent role in the portrayal of the *True Blood* vampires.

Therefore, in *True Blood* Eric offers a negative representation of the vampire-capitalist

because he keeps transgressing human – and vampire – laws to achieve his own goals. Like an unstoppable devouring force, he is willing to behave recklessly to guard his own economic interests and to give up his façade as regular business-man if this suits his needs. Therefore, as Jennifer Culver notes, “Eric’s mainstreaming goals carry more limited expectations [than Bill’s], as he wants to mainstream only when it profits him. Eric’s actions make sense in light of his true goal of maintaining power” (29). In season one, for example, he summons Bill and Sookie to Fangtasia to sort out the disappearance of \$60,000 from the books. He would even be ready to kill his human accountant if proven guilty of the deed, thus showing that betrayal and, most of all, stealing his money, is never forgiven and readily punished (“The Fourth Man in the Fire”, 1.8). Sookie soon discovers that anything for Eric has a price, so she tries to appeal to him: “Let’s make a deal ... If you promise to turn the person who did this to the police, I’m helping you anytime you want.” Sitting at a table, Sookie starts listening to the thoughts of the humans working for Eric and as soon as she touches Ginger, she discovers that the thief is actually a vampire.

The tension of the scene is emphasized by circular camera dolly movements around Sookie, Ginger, Eric and Pam, his progeny, to indicate that the action is reaching a peak and the audience may experience an unexpected plot twist as the truth is revealed. Indeed, as soon as Sookie reveals that it was a vampire who stole the money, she gets attacked by Longshadow, one of Eric’s subjects. While Eric and Pam do not react to save Sookie, Bill does not hesitate to kill the vampire with a stake, completely covering Sookie’s white dress in blood. Using chromatic changes as a metaphor, this gory scene figuratively figures Sookie’s passing from obliviousness and innocence about the vampire world to knowledge of the dangers in which her future collaboration with Eric will constantly put her.¹⁸ Sookie’s bloody dress reinforces the idea that she is now entering a corrupt world and experiencing a metaphorical “defloration” due to her involvement in Eric’s capitalist activities, hence bringing the connection between sexuality and money back to the audience’s attention again.

This scene clearly shows how Eric and Bill differently represent capitalistic features in the show: although Bill later proves to be distrusted, at least he shows “a real sense of caring” (Culver 25) for Sookie, while Eric seems to be detached from his feelings, as he would have let her die with no regrets. This calculating nature makes him the perfect embodiment of the vampire-capitalist in the Marxist interpretation of the term. After Bill impulsively kills the other vampire to save Sookie, Eric’s particularly poignant words show this feature very well: “Whatever I did to Longshadow I would have never done it in front of witnesses, especially non-vampire witnesses. Not smart, Bill, not smart at all” (“Plaisir d'Amour”, 1.9). These words are pronounced as he is framed by a medium frontal shot behind his studio table, the place where he

18. For example, to list a few occasions in which Sookie experiences dangerous situations because of Eric’s request: when Eric asks Sookie to help him find his maker Godric, kidnapped by the Fellowship of the Sun in season two, she almost gets killed by those humans; when in season three Eric asks her to make Russell Edgington, the vampire King of Mississippi, to drink her fairy blood to trick him and meet the sun, so that Eric could get his revenge for that vampire having exterminated his family when he was still human. In season four, the danger for Sookie increases when Eric loses his memory due to the witches’ spell and she has to hide him when the coven decides to hunt him down and kill him. Therefore, Sookie’s interaction with Eric has the constant feature of involving a sort of life-threatening component.

is used to carrying out business matters, while Bill sits quietly on a chair in front of him. Thus, the location has the purpose of emphasizing Eric's business-man status, as well as displaying his power over Bill.

Eric seems to place particular importance on his social role and how he appears in public, both in the human and the vampire world, so that he would have never followed any impulses which could harm his public image. However, unlike Bill, who is concerned about his integration with humans because he wants a "normal" life, Eric is more attentive to the possible consequences to his status. He does not consider mainstream life a priority unless it benefits him, thus his "domestication" is only a pose used to carry on public respectability. In "She's Not There" (4.1), for example, he is actively involved with the media to subdue the public opinion about the vampires' potential dangerousness, after Russell Edgington ripped the spine out from a journalist on TV to assert the vampires' superiority. Perhaps as a commentary on television itself, one shot features Eric on a camera screen. This type of frame is a subtle reference to TV ads used by politicians to publicize their campaigns and to convince their constituents to vote for them. In this case, the vampire Authority is using the same strategy to gain humans' trust back. Then, there is a cut to a frontal close-up of Eric. Sitting close the bar counter at Fangtasia, the vampire gets ready to speak in front of the cameras; he puts his best reassuring face on, and after shouting "Action!", he says in a very charming way:

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Eric Northman. I am a tax-paying American and a small business owner in the great State of Louisiana. I also happen to be a vampire. Now, in the last year there has been a lot of inflammatory talk from politicians warning their constituents not to trust vampires... But, think about it for a second: who would you rather trust? A vampire or a politician? The truth is: vampires are as different from each other as humans are, because we *were* humans... And we ask only to be treated as such. We welcome you into our world as well. We're always more than happy to serve humans here at Fangtasia... And I don't mean for dinner." (4.1)

Eric accepts to speak in front of the cameras only because it is convenient for him and for the Vampire Authority. He needs to re-establish a relationship of trust with humans to support the vampires' business and not because he genuinely believes that it is morally important to do so. This scene is a good example of how the show reinforces of the negative Southern attitude towards capitalism. Eric's speech is alluring, witty and convincing, a great example of marketing strategy to trick both *True Blood's* fictional American audience and the real audience (i.e. us) into believing the vampire-capitalist. This game between Eric and the meta-audiences to whom he addresses his speech uses advertisement as the core medium of the process.

This use of advertising tropes is not accidental, since the birth of advertisement coincided with the diffusion of capitalism itself and became the symbolic flag of its subsequent consumerist culture. Eric's case is no different; he is trying to sell a constructed vampire image to the public in a cunning way. While the American audience does not know the truth, the *True Blood* viewers are well aware of the facts: behind a nice façade, vampires can be dangerous and evil. This scene exhorts the audience in the real world to mistrust the seducing ways used by capitalism. Because capitalism can now literally enter people's homes through TV and other

media, *True Blood* reminds us that the vampire-capitalist Eric advertises the illusion of creating money even though his fascinating personality hides an economic system based on deception and exploitation.

While this attitude undoubtedly shapes Eric as an insensitive, cunning character on the surface, he also shows several layers of complexity which do not frame him as the villain we would expect. As Mukherjea states, “his character is presented as especially enthralling and particularly confounding, difficult to decipher and potentially impossible to redeem fully” (117). This is shown by Eric’s affection for Godric, whose death leaves a deep scar in Eric (“I Will Rose Up”, 2.9). Also, he is devoted to Pam as her maker and, ultimately, romantically to Sookie so much so that in season four he reveals, “I would never hurt anyone as beautiful as you” (“Me and the Devil”, 4.5). Although on more than one occasion Sookie swore she would have never accepted to become Eric’s, she feels more attracted to him only when the witches erase his memory and, hence, all the awful deeds of his past as a vampire, allowing him to become “gentle... Sweet... Like Godric would have wanted it” (Sookie 4.5). While the spell keeps him aware of his vampiric nature (“You Smell like Dinner”, 4.2), it also induces him to forget his social status and role among the vampires as Sheriff of Area 5. In other words, the curse deprives him of his obsession for making money and acquiring power, leaving him without the superstructure of success which made him a model of vampire-capitalist in the first place.

It is particularly significant that Sookie is able to overcome the “horror of intimacy” with Eric only when he is purified by his negative capitalist features, which are now subdued and detached from his personality. Because Sookie is the cultural embodiment of the Southern working class, it is of particular importance that the inherent power struggles embedded within capitalist systems can be overcome only when Eric’s and, thus, the vampire-capitalist’s, more disturbing traits are set aside. If we frame this within the events of the Civil War, it is clear that the complicated relationship between Eric and Sookie resembles the equally complicated economic interactions between the North and the South of the U.S. which, according to a Southern perspective, are characterized by impositions and relations of power. For example, the value of Eric’s feeding on Sookie, which results from their romance, is similar to Bill’s; it reinforces the idea that the vampire-capitalist has to exploit subaltern classes in order to keep prospering through blood drinking. Although he genuinely cares for Sookie, he is also indirectly using her because she stays at her home as she provides for him while he is recovering. However, the failure of the relationship between the two has a similar value as with Bill indicating that capitalism seems to be irreconcilable with the American South. Although Eric shows hints of humanity through his emotional connection with a few other characters, his portrayal is negative overall and tied to fear, since drinking human blood or killing when necessary is always one of his prominent features.

In the multicultural Louisiana setting, both Bill and Eric are negative reminders of an economic system which is portrayed both as reckless and inevitable. These characters are used as narrative devices to materialize Southern anxieties hidden in the collective regional subconscious. They are presented to the audience with brutal honesty and no expectation of a final catharsis for the haunting past of the Civil War, as we would expect from a typical product of horror TV. The audience of *True Blood* clearly perceives the idea that Eric and Bill’s

domestication through mainstreaming behaviours, which indicate cultural assimilation and social normativity, is only superficial. Although the American South believes it has passed from the old economic system to capitalism, the vampire-capitalist's faked mainstreaming in *True Blood* is a symbol of historical failure and psychologically reinforces the feelings of Thanatos surrounding the war in Southern imagery.

Capitalism is still a threat for the region, and the *True Blood* vampires are a tangible Freudian expression of the social anxieties built around this perception, curiously turning the vampires' sexual repression into historical and economic entanglements. As always, sex and money seem bound together, and *True Blood* makes no exception. These vampires achieve neither redemption nor a real integration with human society and, thus, they are unable to fit completely the contemporary sympathetic vampire model. The audience cannot ultimately overcome these vampires' social Otherness, even though these creatures' complexity determines their *chiaroscuro* personality, which allows viewers to empathize occasionally with them. Vampires' Othered status never finds a proper resolution in the show and is always left as a lingering, uncomfortable by-product of the Civil War, proving that this historical event will not – and cannot – be forgotten.

2.6 Slavery and Issues of Race in the *True Blood* Vampires

Along with the traumatic experience of vampires' capitalist Otherness, *True Blood* also represents issues of race. In this section I would like to focus my analysis on how the Civil War's negative legacy of slavery may shed new light on racial issues in *True Blood*. While it is a fairly understudied aspect, it deserves more critical attention because of the influence of these issues on Southern socio-cultural structures to the present day. In my analysis, I would like to discuss how the *True Blood* vampires express the social anxieties experienced by following the African-Americans' emancipation from slavery. From a Southern perspective, vampires are a contemporary projection of the social threat represented by freed ex-slaves who have now overcome their position of subordination and subvert the social, cultural and political balance of the region.

This seems to retain a strong connection with the outcome of the Civil War, which imposed a different social organization on the American South as a consequence of the prominence of the Northern attitude of anti-slavery. The occurrence of this social change also becomes evident in the evolution of the vampire from *Interview with the Vampire* to *True Blood*, to be discussed later in the section. While in *Interview* the vampire slaveholder symbolizes the white man's colonial power over African-Americans, in *True Blood* there is an attempt to subvert these roles by creating different dynamics. Identifying the vampire with emerging minority groups, I would like to show how once again the representation of vampires generates anxiety due to the fear of the possible changes in social and cultural structures where the "Others" are in a position of dominance.

Before focusing specifically on the connection between vampires and slavery, I would like to point out how current criticism has mainly analyzed these characters in relation to queer social emancipation and gay rights. As J.M. Tyree suggests, the graphic portrayal of sexuality in

True Blood has a great deal to do with contemporary society because the show positions itself as a loose but obvious allegory about the mainstream acceptance of so-called “alternative lifestyles” – it’s about tolerance and integration of many kinds, using the vitriolic American debate over gay marriage as a touchstone, while linking it with the Southern reaction against civil rights. (32)

Indeed, the theme of sexuality often intersects with vampires’ queerness¹⁹, paving the way to question the American South’s real acceptance of social and ethnic minority groups at large. Psychoanalytic theories offer useful support in understanding the reasons the vampire is associated with homophobic patterns and behaviours. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the vampire conceals Freudian connections with the uncanny, described as the familiar that is repressed and hidden in the human subconscious. The vampire’s uncanny nature brings to the surface the taboo concerning the potential contamination from homoerotic behaviours, which supposedly constitute a deviance from accepted social norms. Discussing the uncanny in literature, Freud notes that we experience “many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life” (249). Hence, the fictional vampire becomes, in literature first and in media later, a tangible projection of the hidden impulses of the subconscious. While the rejection of homosexual impulses and the resulting homophobic anxieties within the unconscious are part of our understanding of the *True Blood* vampires, these undead also expand the rejection of Otherness into a broader context.

Focusing on the theme of homosexuality in the show, Darren Elliot-Smith claims that *True Blood* embraces this topic in a provocative, open-minded way. However, he points out that the show often uses the structure of heterosexual relationships to measure up queer relations and to define a “hierarchy of worthiness” (148), where only those individuals in stable relationships seem to have equal rights. Although *True Blood* does not always succeed in critiquing the hyper-conservative representation of the contemporary American South, openly discussing these issues is a valuable attempt to address regional stereotypes positively. At the same time, this approach also poses serious questions concerning the social integration of diverse groups. Hence, it displays “the contradiction of acceptance at the expense of conformity. [...] In order to assimilate, there has to be a watering down of the one’s ‘true’ nature (in the case of vampires, to drink human blood, to be confidently out, not to feel ashamed)” (Elliot-Smith 150).

Elliot-Smith’s essay belongs to one of the major lines of criticism on the topic, focusing on the identification between the vampires and the struggle for equality undergone by the gay movement, which echoes the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the suffragettes at the

19. Again, the connection between vampires and homoerotic desires, both repressed and more self-evident, is part of a long tradition of criticism which relies on psychoanalytic theories to define vampirism as a symbolic representation of “the most vicious sexual perversions” (Gelder 67). The figure of Dracula, for example, “channels homoerotic desires through heterosexual relations” (76) using his vampire wives to project the idea of bad mothers. Carmilla, protagonist of Sheridan Le Fanu’s novel with the same title, bears clear references to female homosexuality and the uncomfortable Victorian refusal to consider active female sexuality. Last but not least, *Interview with the Vampire* offers a more contemporary portrayal of these anxieties through the morbid relationship between Louis and Lestat which, although not strictly sexual, conceals homoerotic dynamics. Hence, in all these cases, it seems clear that acts deviating from heterosexuality are strongly associated with vampirism and said acts pertain to the world of uncanny experiences.

beginning of the twentieth century and the process leading to the Equal Rights Amendments (Brace and Arp). Criticism also addresses this topic from a more political point of view. Joseph J. Foy, for example, interrogates whether vampires deserve the same rights as humans because of their compliance with shared social norms (52). Instead, William M. Curtis focuses on the *True Blood* vampire and issues concerning the balance between liberalism and diversity within U.S. society, questioning when and how personal freedoms should be regulated by the State.²⁰

However, I would argue that the presence of homosexuality in the show is also a moment to rethink the social dynamics in the perspective of the Southern setting and history in particular, rather than of America in general. Current criticism has rarely analyzed the role of the discrimination faced by the queer vampires in *True Blood* as a medium to approach critically similar issues in relation to other minorities, especially African-Americans in the South. These processes seem to both have derived from the same Freudian unconscious repressions as a response to the failed acceptance of diversity, which in *True Blood* is linked specifically to the ethnic and cultural diversity generated from the ashes of the Civil War. This aspect in part follows the criticism about *True Blood*, which indicates that ongoing issues of race deeply permeate its narrative.

The association between the undead and the stigmatization of particular ethnic groups is, again, one of the common recurring tropes since the birth of the vampire genre and has nurtured the undertones behind these monsters' Otherness. As Hudson claims: "Vamps and vampires are imagined as sexually wanton, thereby potential threats to racial purity. Vampirism gives expression to fears over miscegenation and passing that are both historically and symbolically linked to the reciprocity between immigration and nationalism in the USA" (129). The value of *True Blood* as a Southern narrative reinforces the concept that racial dynamics are a construction. In the case of this TV show the parallel between the discrimination endured by vampires and African-Americans is a fictional construction, but it serves well to indicate that, on the one hand, race and racism are relative and contingent to the context in which they are produced and, on the other hand, that they are cultural products, not a natural state.

Also, the show reminds viewers that discourses of race need constant validation in order to be perceived as dominant, hinting that discrimination is an institution in itself which remains even though the subjects who endure it change through time. In this fictional Louisiana, African-Americans were once the individuals at the centre of this "racist ordeal," whereas now vampires have replaced them. Therefore, studying *True Blood* is vital to understanding how this media text adapts the vampire genre to this prominent function of perpetrating the structure of racism over again:

Vampires threaten to expose categories of social differentiation as illusions, categories that are powerful yet simultaneously fragile. Social differentiation requires constant reinforcement, not only through laws and institutional practices, but also through media representations, particularly when differentiation is

20. Indeed, he states that "integration of these vamps poses a unique political challenge, because they have long been participants in an illiberal, hierarchical political system that is incompatible with even the most tolerant philosophical conceptions of liberalism" (66).

deployed to legitimize social hierarchies. Ideological constructions of race and nation must be continually produced and reproduced, adjusted and readjusted, in order to sustain the illusion that they are natural, factual, divine, or biological – and even vampire films contribute to this discourse. (Hudson 129)

In the case of *True Blood*, current criticism has emphasized that these vampires are socially-persecuted creatures who “become sympathetic [...] not because they are [...] resisting the thirst [...] but because they are victims of prejudice” (Abbott 34) as a result of their “coming out of the coffin.” This, according to the main line of interpretation, generates identification with the vampires because of their status as outcasts. Mutch emphasizes that the *True Blood* vampires offer new forms of racial and cultural integration, by creating sub-groups such as vampires, fairies and werewolves living within mainstream society. These are considered mirrors of real hidden groups in the U.S. today, who resist full integration within regular social structures but keep their own identities while seeking coexistence. Indeed, “globalisation does not remove or disintegrate racial or niche identities and connections but re-situates, re-negotiates and transforms” (Mutch 86).

This concept also applies to the connection between the *True Blood* vampires and their role as symbols of the African-Americans’ threatening emancipation and affirmation of their regained identity. Once the Civil War erased the institution of slavery *per se*, the freedom of ex-slaves had serious political consequences in the South and strongly limited plantation owners’ influence on the local government. Indeed, before the war slaveholders “dominated the federal government. They created a state weak enough to pose no threat to slavery, but strong enough to assist the institution when necessary, such as in the expulsion of the British, Spanish, and Native Americans from the Southeast, making possible the creation of the ‘Cotton Kingdom’” (Foner 96-97). Hence, the Union, seeking a more cohesive national unity, pursued abolitionism driven by specific interests unrelated to the moral implications concerning the practice of slavery.²¹ As for the South, although slavery was indeed formally banished, forms of racism were not eradicated but led to new forms of discrimination which persist in the American South to the present:

The injustice and poverty that followed in the rapidly changing South, a mockery of American claims of moral leadership in the world. Black Southerners would struggle, largely on their own, for the next one hundred years. Their status, bound in an ever-tightening segregation, would stand as a rebuke to the United States in world opinion. The postwar South and its new system of segregation, in fact, became an explicit model for [apartheid in] South Africa. (Ayers 57)

Considering this complex background, the *True Blood* vampires’ Great Revelation and fight for equality through the American Vampire League offer several similarities with the

21. In the 1860s, the ideals behind the abolition of slavery were to offer equal rights for African-Americans, creating a “freedom based on the same basis as white male American freedom: property, citizenship, dignity, and equality before the law” (Ayers 57). However, the resistance of slaveholders to accept this type of approach “alarmed the North and strengthened hostility to slavery, not only among abolitionists motivated by considerations of morality, but among the far larger number of Northerners who cared little about blacks but came to see slavery as a threat to their own liberties and future economic prospects” (Foner 93).

condition of African-American ex-slaves after abolitionism. At first glance, it may seem methodologically incorrect to associate African-Americans with the *True Blood* vampires, who are portrayed by mainly Caucasians in the show, with only a few exceptions. This reinforces the idea, already discussed in the Introduction, that media productions are always explicitly or implicitly about whiteness and about white privilege. However, I would like to point out how these creatures may be plausibly identified with this minority because the main feature of *True Blood* vampirism is to erase individuals' ethnicity and to blur their cultural identities into the categorization of "vampire race."²²

While this quality seems to negate a precise identification with any specific cultural group, it may also imply that vampires own the peculiar status of being ethnically polymorphous, as they gather into a variety of groupings under the general category of vampirism. This allows me to draw reasonably a parallel between these creatures and African-Americans to a certain extent. Nonetheless, some of the critics, such as Victoria Amador, justify the fact that vampires are beyond any precise racial identification because they literally assimilate everyone's blood, making no discrimination in their blood-drinking: "vampires [...] are the less prejudiced, more pluralistic and multiracial in some ways" (132). Although the idea of vampires' anti-racist blood-drinking is functional to explain their multiculturalism, in my view Amador's interpretation may be perceived as questionable because it is simply a social behavior adopted by these creatures rather than a real moral choice.

Skin color is also another important aspect not fully addressed by current criticism, which may justify discussing the parallels between African-American ex-slaves and vampires. Although it may actually sound paradoxical, the *True Blood* vampires' bleached-white complexion does not automatically place them at the top of the ideal Aryan "food chain." On the contrary, their whiteness is one of the first marks of discrimination for humans, marking a very precise boundary between them and humans and evoking the racial dynamics between African-Americans and white Southern people in the show. Similar to ongoing discourses of race, where skin color is associated with biological inferiority, the vampires' complexion is a hint of their Otherness. This allows *True Blood* to attempt subverting the pre-established racial relations which are often at the core of movies and TV series.

In "Sparks Fly Out" (1.5), Arlene's son asks her a question about Bill: "Why is he so white?" and Arlene answers very bluntly: "Dear, *we* are white... He's dead". Her words summarize very well how the notion of race and whiteness is reinforced with a biological justification for Bill's inferiority: because he is technically dead, lacking breathing and a beating heart, he does not share the same standards that officially qualify him as an acceptable member of human society. This seems a very straightforward reference to twentieth-century racist evolutionary studies advocating the "scientific" superiority of whiteness against non-white ethnicities on the basis of supposed biological proof. Hence, in the show "white(r) is the new black," carrying out a new type of discrimination which uses old racist patterns.

22. As Harris writes in *Living Dead in Dallas*, the general perception is that these creatures "aren't American. They aren't even black or Asian or Indian. They aren't Rotarians or Baptists. They're all just plain vampires" (137).

Another important aspect connecting the *True Blood* vampire with the topic of the post-slavery South is the analogy addressing similar cultural dynamics between this fictional character and Southern history. Before “coming out of the coffin” vampires had been living in the shadows, separated from humans for centuries and relying on a culture based on a type of feudal system and their set of rules:

In America, every state appears to have a king or queen who rules with apparently absolute authority over the state’s vampire population. Sophie-Anne LeClerq, for example, is queen of Louisiana. States are divided into areas, once called fiefdoms that are ruled by vampire sheriffs who owe allegiance to their state monarch. Louisiana is divided into five areas, and Eric Northman is sheriff of Area 5, which includes Bon Temps and Shreveport. Since Bill has taken up residence in Bon Temps, he must obey Eric, who in turn must obey Sophie-Anne. (Curtis 60-70)

In addition to this political system, they also share precise vampire cultural traditions which must be obeyed and survive even after the Great Revelation to humans. For example, the relationship between makers and their progeny is a bond of blood which goes beyond mere human relations and even time, constituting a form of personal identification and self-categorization.

In “I Will Rise Up” (2.9), we are shown that vampiric bonds reinforce and overcome human notions of relationship and that both Eric and Godric identify themselves in these terms, even after more than a thousand years together. The scene has a particular visual impact because it is edited with alternating close-ups of Eric and Godric. Because close-ups invade the characters’ personal space, in filmmaking these shots are often indicative of their psychological dimension. Therefore, alternating close-ups of Eric and Godric indicates a strong connection between these two characters. At the same time, this technique shows the characters’ different point of view concerning Godric’s death, because the montage frames Eric and Godric in separated shots, which in cinematic language suggests opposition. The setting is on a rooftop right before sunrise, shot in natural daylight. Godric²³, who is tired of his life and wants to die, reminds viewers of a Christ-like figure ready to leave the mundane world behind and sacrifice himself to meet the “True Death.”

His pure white clothes suggest his now higher spiritual and moral condition and show detachment from his vampire life and his striving for inner peace. Conversely, Eric’s clothes are black, signifying that he is still entangled with the vampires’ inner darkness and materialism and metaphorically opposes Godric’s spiritual growth. The scene reaches its acme when the alternation of Eric and Godric’s close-ups is interrupted by a frontal long shot showing a panoramic of the rooftop; Godric stands immobile, Eric bent on his knees and Sookie positioned on the right part of the shot, quietly participating in the scene. Because the long shot shows the characters from afar it suggests a sense of melancholy and despair. A sad tune of violins enhances the inevitability of Eric and Godric’s separation. As Eric realizes that Godric will

23. *True Blood* seems to pay particular attention in picking its characters’ names. Godric comes from the Old English words “God,” (divinity) and “ric” (power, rule), a rough translation could be “power of God,” which suits well the *True Blood* character’s personality.

commit suicide, we are shown a close-up of Eric's face crying tears of blood followed by a medium shot of Godric. With a sad but quiet expression the latter describes his relation with Eric as "Father... Brother... Son," putting his hand on Eric's head as a final paternalistic gesture. After that, Godric meets the sun, leaving Eric in despair. This reveals how the bond between vampires goes beyond time and is even stronger than human relations.

The connection to African-American ex-slaves in this case is not immediate, but it may still apply to the *True Blood* vampires if we take into account how slavery culturally influenced the people who were forced into this condition. Most of the slaves were from different areas of West Africa and, thus, held different languages, cultures and religious beliefs. This cultural diversity in part got lost through the impossibility of communicating effectively among each other as well as due to the institution of slavery itself, as people were forced to adopt white culture and language and abandon their own traditions. Nonetheless, part of these West African cultures survived in other forms, as people found common ground and shared "a fundamental outlook toward the past, the present and the future which could have well constituted the basis for a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery" (Levine 4).

From this perspective, if vampirism may be described as a form of slavery itself, in which the vampirism is bound to blood-drinking for survival, it also has the same ability to create a new culture in itself based on shared values which go beyond the single vampire's human provenance. In addition, if the vampire feudal structure may be perceived as an institution of values based on relations of fidelity and not only as a political system, it could be also be defined as a cultural system as well because it influences the way individuals deal with each other. Obviously, the main difference from slavery is that while cultural diversity was partially maintained, slaves did not constitute any political system inside the national U.S. constitutional organization because the relations of power embedded within slavery and colonial discourse made this impossible.

Another interesting aspect to explore in the connection between *True Blood* and slavery is related to the moment in which both vampires and ex-slaves are acknowledged in Southern society. Vampires lived a parallel, hidden existence unknown to the human world in a submerged reality but the Great Revelation suddenly exposed them to the public. In a certain way, this recalls the status embodied by slaves who, after gaining their freedom, passed from being almost an unnoticed, faceless mass to be socially acknowledged – at least on the paper – by constitutional laws. However, their social acknowledgement occurred at an institutional level and did not convert into a full integration with the Southern system:

Racial prejudices led to these discriminatory measures passed by state and local governments that sought to keep blacks at a lower social and economic position. Jim Crow laws strictly enforced public racial segregation in almost every aspect of Southern life. The segregation laws did not exist in the North, but racial discrimination by Northerners was widespread nonetheless. For example, blacks could not buy houses in the same neighborhoods as whites. Economic and educational opportunities for black Americans were greatly restricted. (Rudd, paragraph 13)

The same process is experienced by the *True Blood* vampires. For example, in the majority of the U.S. states vampires cannot marry humans, except in Vermont, as we find out through the TV in “Plaisir d’Amour” (1.9). They are excluded from a few professions, as well as some types of businesses. This makes clear that discrimination and prejudice against vampires are widespread in American society, especially as far as mixed relationships are concerned.

Amador in particular focuses her attention on how, despite the episodes of racism against vampires in the show, *True Blood* is actually positive in exposing the current changes in the American South concerning the acceptance of interracial relationships. According to Amador these relations shown in *True Blood* are “facilitating the transformation of racial identities” (127) and prove that the South is now more open to the possibility of multiculturalism. While this analysis is correct and shows an improvement, I would like to point out that Amador justifies her approach mainly referring to Tara Thornton and Lafayette Reynolds, the lead human African-American characters in the show, who often have interracial relations. In a certain way, Amador seems not to consider that African-Americans are now somehow considered “less diverse” in this fictional world, while the real Other is actually the vampire. Amador’s analysis does not take into account any vampire-human relationship to justify her point regarding Southern multiculturalism. Indeed, the portrayal of the relationships between humans and vampires is not shaped by the same open-minded approach. In this way, vampires take the place of African-Americans as a minority in the South and, hence, they become the focus of racial hatred.²⁴ An example already discussed in this work concerns Sookie and Bill, who experience a very strong prejudice against their relationship in Bon Temps.

An even more relevant example involves Jessica Hamby, Bill’s progeny, and the human Hoyt Fortenberry. Jessica was turned into a vampire against her will by Bill, who was forced to do so by the Vampire Authority as a punishment for having stabbed Longshadow. Jessica’s turning into a vampire is not her choice; her Othered status is imposed upon her. Like ex-slaves, she chose neither her “Otherness” nor the social position she would have embodied since then as a vampire. Therefore, it is even more tragic when Maxine, Hoyt’s mother, shows a great hostility to Jessica because she is in love with her son, as Jessica’s only fault is not belonging to the right race – the human race (“I Will Rise Up”, 2.9). Maxine is clearly a woman full of hatred, not only for vampires but also for anyone not responding to her idea of normality. She justifies her prejudice by saying that “that’s the way [she] was raised up” as a Southern woman. Despite the woman’s prejudice, Hoyt forces her to meet Jessica because he believes that she is the right girl for him.

However, while meeting at Merlotte’s, Maxine harshly answers that although she sympathizes with Jessica, his son cannot be “with an orphan vampire” but must be with a good girl who can bring him children, and Jessica, as a vampire, will be never able to do that. The sterility of vampire/human relations is one of the core reasons why Maxine considers Hoyt and

24. While vampires have become the scapegoat for much of the cultural hatred in this fictional American South, in the show the minorities who in real life actually experience discrimination have hard times themselves. In “Escape from the Dragon House” (1.) Tara gives voice to this harsh reality: “People think because we got vampires out in the open, race isn’t the issue no more. ... Race may not be the hot-button issue it once was, but it’s still a button you can push on people.”

Jessica's relationship inappropriate. In the case of vampires the prejudice is generated by the impossibility of procreating like humans, while in the case of real interracial relationships one of the core Southern prejudice is to deny the possibility of cultural and ethnic hybridization. This responds to historical Southern laws against miscegenation, which were only rescinded by the Supreme Court in 1967. Some Southern states had fiercely opposed the possibility of mixed couples for a good part of the twentieth-century. The recent change to the laws helped move the South "towards a growing mixed-race and interracial population" (Amador 127).

On top of the marginalized social role of vampires in *True Blood*, the recurrent acts of violence against them parallel events following the abolition of slavery. *True Blood* echoes this chapter of the Southern past by portraying the same behaviours against vampires. The first significant example in the show is when Chuck, Wayne and Royce, a group of three working-class "rednecks," who are regular customers at Merlotte's, begin to speak loudly against vampires. When Bill speaks at the meeting of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead, the trio show great disrespect by mincing some garlic in front of Bill on purpose because they know that vampires are allergic to it ("Sparks Fly Out", 1.5). If that were not enough, their behavior escalates irreparably when a group of not-so-friendly vampires come to Bon Temps asking Bill to share their nest with him and threatening the people in Merlotte's Bar. The trio respond to this by setting the vampires' home on fire, eliminating all of them and almost killing Bill, who manages to escape only thanks to Sookie's help ("Burning House of Love", 1.7).

While it is clear that these characters express the "culture of hate" within which a majority of poorly educated Southern people grew up, in a certain way they also specifically portray the limited mentality of a little Louisiana town with no consistent experiences in terms of accepting multiculturalism. *True Blood* has much to offer in terms of critically approaching these issues and providing the audience with the subtext to question whether the American South has the tendency for historical models to repeat themselves, despite contemporary efforts to counteract the old patterns of discrimination which are nonetheless portrayed in the series. Starting from sexual diversity to pass on to racism issues, vampires in the show seem to be used as a metaphorical cradle containing all the types of diversity which do not fit into the Southern mainstream society. Therefore, *True Blood* deserves critical attention, as it offers a window on social issues which are not fully encompassed yet are part of Southerners' everyday lives. The show offers a moment of self-reflection on how discrimination plays a major role in Southern culture and is a repeating pattern adapted to the contemporary American South, while echoing the anxieties of the larger American context through the myth of the vampire.

Indeed, the show's anti-vampire behaviour is a reflection of a movement advocating hatred against vampires in *True Blood's* fictional U.S.: the Fellowship of the Sun. In the show, this Christian-affiliated Church promotes hatred against vampires through the slogan "God Hates Fangs."²⁵ Not only does it preach against these creatures, but it goes as far as using violence in

25. This phrase refers to the Westboro Baptist Church, a real movement located in Kansas and preaching against homosexuals and other Christian and non-Christian religions. The *True Blood* "God Hates Fangs" slogan is a clear reference to the Church "God Hates Fags" motto, which embodies its core beliefs: "the sovereignty of God, His eternal retribution for most of mankind and the certainty of sodomites' damnation" (GodHatesFags.com). However, it is necessary to specify that the Westboro Church mainly focuses on hatred against gay people, while the

the name of God, claiming that vampires are dangerous creatures who violate nature and who have to be eliminated. Because the motto rewrites the Westboro Baptist Church's message against gay people, the parallel with vampirism shows how denied Freudian impulses tend to expand from mere sexual repression to a general rejection of the "fangs" as a form of racial and social difference. As Reverend Steve Newlin²⁶ tells Jason: "We're all in trouble, Jason, as long as there are vampires in the world" ("Shake and Fingerpop", 2.4). Behind this public façade as a good citizen, Steve and his wife Sarah hide a corrupted nature: "the Newlins [...] are wealthy, attractive Republican Texans whose adulterous, bloodthirsty behaviour betrays their inner trashiness" (Amador 126). This is a clear critique in the U.S. of the false morality wrapped up with pseudo-religious beliefs which serve to justify an alleged cause, while the people advertising this cause have questionable ethics themselves.

Also, the Newlins are the "*True Blood* edition" of the subversion of Christian beliefs that justify racial hatred. As the spiritual mentor of the Fellowship, Newlin is first advertising on the media that vampires are not entitled to equal rights because they live in darkness and, therefore, by association, they are evil and worship the Devil. Later, Newlin wants to turn his word into terrorist attacks against vampires. He forms a group called the Soldiers of the Sun, an elite group of paramilitary, fervent Christians ready to do everything in order to eliminate vampires. In other words, he is trying to set up a crusade against the undead, but such hatred is more caused by personal reasons than real religious motives, since Newlin wants to avenge his father's and mother's deaths at the hands of vampires. After Eric and Bill manage to disband the Fellowship leaders, the action escalates with a last act of gratuitous violence when one of the Soldiers of the Sun blows himself up at the party for Godric's release, killing a lot of innocent vampires ("I Will Rise Up" 2.9).

While these examples are indicative of the tendency to associate Christian fundamentalism with terrorism, the show also partially connects these events to the violence against African-Americans at the time of racial segregation. Violence against this particular minority also connects with *Interview with the Vampire* and highlights a few significant differences which have occurred in the symbolism behind the modern American vampire in the South. Since the trope of discrimination is present in this much earlier vampire media text, it may confirm that while racial hatred is indeed an historical construction, it is also a presence haunting the collective imaginary of the American South. It is particularly interesting that Louis prospered because of his wealth as a Louisiana plantation owner. At the centre of this discourse is the vampire's economic power as in *True Blood*.

Fellowship of the Sun in the show relies more on racial prejudice to justify their core beliefs and, probably, the emphasis is here that they both share the similar idea of discriminating against individuals on the basis of their identity, be this sexual or cultural. However, the violent tones embraced by the Fellowship to combat Otherness may be also perceived as an echo of the painful deeds perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan. This group notoriously professed racial hatred and was born right after the end of the Civil War with a strong Southern provenance, so it is clearly a subtext to the Fellowship of the Sun.

26. Playing with names again, the surname Newlin may ironically refer to "New line", thus indicating innovation, which clashes with his and Sarah's very conservative and racist predicaments as a way to hint that real change is impossible to accomplish.

Although it would be incorrect to include Louis in the vampire-capitalist model because he is of aristocratic French descent and not a bourgeois, he nonetheless shares a similar privileged social position to Eric and Bill. In the movie, we are shown that Louis owns a beautiful colonial house richly designed and furnished, and that he also own several slaves. However, while these vampires are also identified with a minority, Louis metaphorically embodies the white colonial power oppressing this same minority. Indeed, after Louis becomes a vampire, a nocturnal creature driven by his thirst for blood, his life irremediably changes. Despite his remorse, Louis feeds especially on slaves, as they are the only individuals whose disappearance goes unnoticed. Thus, this metaphorically refers to the vampire's value as a dominant force exploiting those classes which are socially weaker and unable to rebel against oppression. Finally, Louis starts feeding on his own slaves too. Although defined as a good master by his servant Yvette, she laments that "it's been long time since [Louis] visited the slave quarters," while Louis is increasingly unable to control his impulses and the slaves begin to be afraid of him.

The second scene with Yvette is particularly intense because of the close-ups of the girl's wrist and Louis' face, as she tries to convince him to send Lestat away and touch his hand to establish a human contact. The scene shows Louis' inner struggle to resist the blood thirst, which he eventually cannot control: he ends up killing the girl. Since the slaves have understood his real nature, they practice Voodoo to hunt Louis and Lestat down. Louis, realizing that his nature is irremediably corrupted, decides to burn down his mansion and free the slaves, saying that "the place is cursed and that their master is the Devil." The scene is highly evocative, as we see Louis' house burning down to metaphorically indicate the death of Louis' last shreds of humanity as well as a reference to slaves' future freedom built on the destruction of the Civil War.

From this description it seems clear that blood-drinking consistently binds the *True Blood* vampire-capitalist to *Interview with the Vampire*. Both texts imply that the American South was built on the exploitation of minorities, which is metaphorically indicated by the vampires' reckless blood-drinking and the trail of death they bring. However, the similarities seem to end here, since the connection between Louis and colonial power is the main subtext, whereas the *True Blood* vampires are a direct expression of the capitalist bourgeois class. Thus, responding to a slightly different historical context within the same geographical region, they project the pre-War heritage into the post-War aftermath and show the recurrent patterns which led to racial discrimination from one period to the other.

The interesting aspect of these two Southern vampire narratives consists in the role reversal occurring in both works. While in the show vampires basically embody the role of the ex-slaves, the oppressed, in Neil Jordan's movie the vampire represents the dominant position of the white colonizer, later to become the Southern slaveholder. This dissonance between these two different typologies of vampire may indicate the evolution of Southern social subtext from the 1970s to the current socio-cultural situation in the region. *Interview with the Vampire* clearly responds to the former, being the adaptation of Rice's novel, and identifies the vampire's Otherness as a reinforcement of the power over African-American minorities, who in the 1970s were still fighting for equal recognition and positive integration in the South. However, since the adaptation of this text dates back to 1994, it is inevitably influenced by the African-American

context of that time, as the slaves' uprising scene hints. In the 1990s, the path to African-American equality was characterized by the troublesome events of the Los Angeles riots (1992), which escalated into an extremely violent six-day uprising as a result of an African-American's unjust beating at the hands of the police.²⁷

In *True Blood*, a cultural switch occurs as African-Americans' emancipation has indeed altered the American South's resistance to multiculturalism. However, the path to integration bears the awareness that social dynamics have irremediably changed and that white dominance is in fact receding. Therefore, the *True Blood* vampires' portrayal as the modern heirs of ex-slaves who are perceived as an evil force to be marginalized carries with it the social anxiety and awareness of the modern South, which fears a shift in the balance of power as African-American minorities empower themselves in more consistent ways. On the one hand, the channelling of the ghost of slavery into a positive catalyst which can lead to a better future means that the American South is experiencing consistent socio-cultural changes and creating new dynamics in the region. On the other hand, the downside of the vampires' negative representation as ex-slaves and capitalist models signifies that the region still has not fully reconciled with the legacy of the Civil War, and maybe it never completely will. As Eric Foner states, the war "forever changed the course of American and world history" (98), and the South, willingly or not, must accept that its past is still a part of its present, no matter how uncomfortable this may be.

Therefore, as a form of contemporary media text *True Blood* has much to teach the contemporary South about its uncomfortable heritage. It offers a valuable opportunity to the audience for self-reflection through its gory scenes and hyper-emphasized vampire sexuality, which is used as a medium to discuss the social and historical anxieties of the region. At the same time, *True Blood* seems to carry on this process in a subtle way, borrowing a way to deal with race and history from famous Hollywood counterparts:

Audience expectations are largely framed within the acculturation to Hollywood production values, visual styles, and narrative strategies that produce "culturally trained citizens" – and Hollywood trains its audiences to value whiteness. US audiences (and global audiences trained by Hollywood productions) read films in remarkably complex ways, largely unconscious of the unnatural movements of continuity editing and the unnatural constructions of race and nation. (Hudson 147)

While succeeding in showing a new South, *True Blood* in parts fails at offering a portrayal which could be totally disruptive of the Southern social mechanisms. Through a

27. While these events deeply affected the U.S., the political situation changed during Bill Clinton's presidency (1993-2001). Characterized by more African-American appointments than the past as a clear sign of progress, Clinton's presidency was not exempt from mistakes as far as the situation of this minority is concerned. Many African-Americans regarded Clinton as the first "black president," with all the incongruities and wrong assumptions this term may carry, because he was able to culturally connect with this minority. Many were also convinced that "blacks were doing better economically than whites. [...] By 2000, nearly 30 percent of African-American respondents believed that blacks were doing better economically than whites" (Harris-Lacewell par. 3). However, this perception was erroneous, deriving mostly from appreciation of the President's ability to empathize with black minorities (par. 7). Economic inequality was still widespread between whites and African-Americans in the 1990s.

complex yet innovative game of mirrors, older tropes of vampire sexuality are shaped and re-modeled to convey the uncomfortable message that the trauma of the Civil War, with its economic consequences and racial issues, will likely be part of the American South in the future. In the end, it does not matter whether the *True Blood* vampires advocate contrasting messages about free sexual expression, gay rights, capitalism or African-American minorities; the main purpose is to use them to bring uncomfortably to the surface the fears and anxieties of a region which still struggles to reconcile with its past. In *True Blood*, the constant subtext is to expose the audience – and the Southern audience in particular – to the social contradictions of this region through the channels of a commercial media product, hence acting as a source of socio-cultural criticism far beyond its original mass-culture provenance. The show becomes a social statement *per se*, suggesting that while it is important to recognize the progress accomplished by the American South, the *True Blood* vampires are teaching us that “before the night is through” we have yet to deal with many other bad things.

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